

Scotpress

# ENTERPRISE

LOG

ENTRIES

84



a  
STAR TREK  
fanzine

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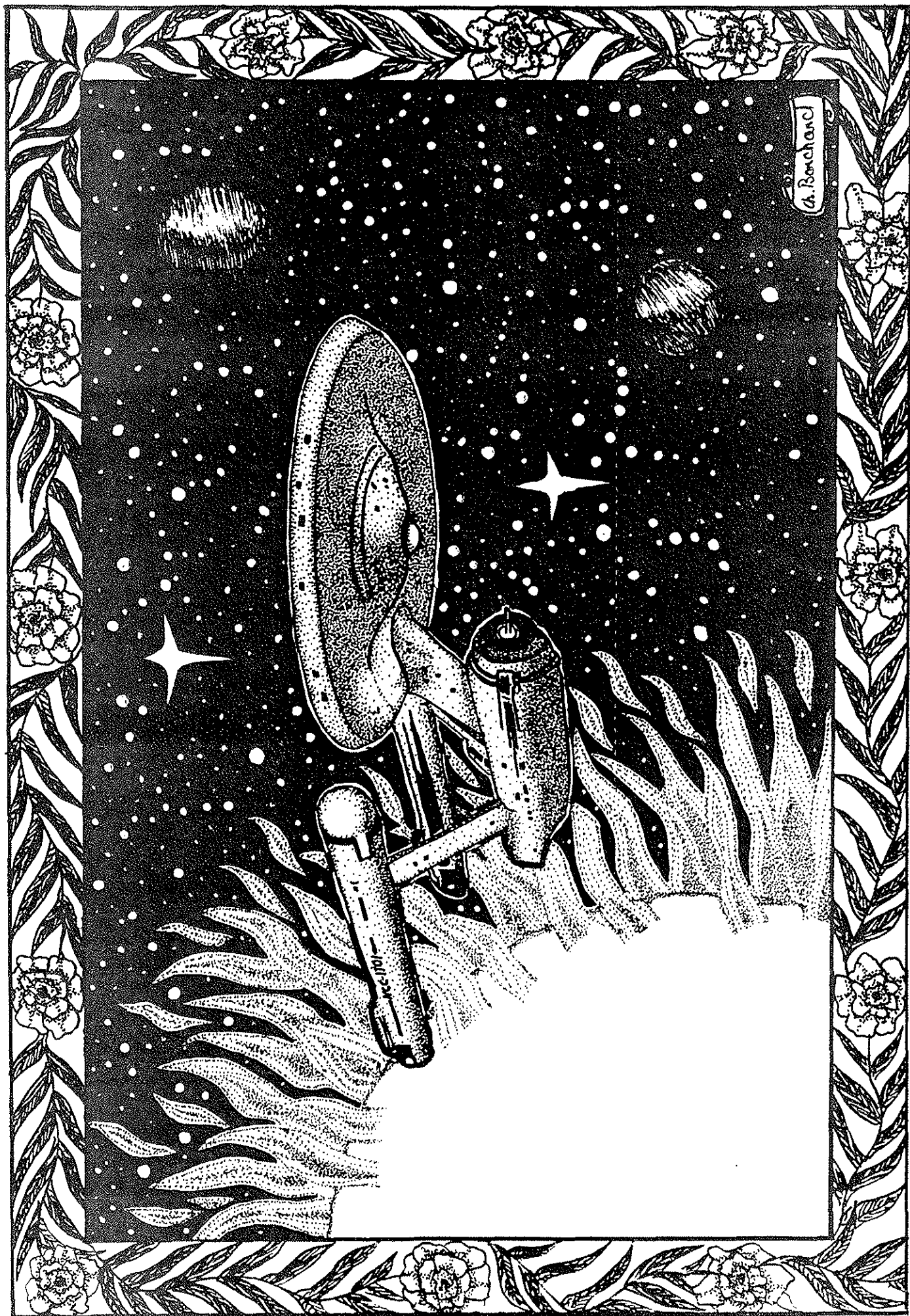
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# THE INTERVIEW

by

Sandy Catchick

As he came into the room the other candidates looked at him surreptitiously. He found a seat and as he sat down he wondered why he had come.

He was old. At least old enough to be the father, if not the grandfather of any of the other candidates waiting in the outer office. They all looked as though they would have sailed through the physical tests and medical which were prerequisites for entry to the service. He had been lucky to scrape through. It was a long time since he'd scaled a wall or climbed a tree. A very long time.

Why had he come?

Was it to be humiliated yet again - this time by strangers? Was it because he needed to prove to himself that he was as good as the next man - even if she didn't think so? Was it because out there he could start again, anonymously - a name, rank and serial number with no past to haunt him?

It was none of those things. The answer was simple. He had nowhere else to go.

"Mr. McCoy," came the call from the young ensign in charge of administration.

"Doctor McCoy" he corrected automatically as the sound of his name brought him out of his personal reverie.

He returned to the present in time to catch the look of disbelief on the faces of the other candidates and to hear the whispered comments.

"I wouldn't trust him to practice on me."

"Bet he's no better than a witch doctor."

"Who says he's really a Doctor? He might have made it up."

The boy making the last remark won himself a stare from piercing blue eyes. McCoy might be down but he wasn't out, yet. The boy looked away in embarrassment as those eyes confirmed the Doctor's authenticity beyond question.

McCoy followed the young ensign into the interview room, suddenly sure of himself. He had nothing to lose. He'd already lost his wife, Sarah, to another man; his daughter, Joanna, to a misunderstanding.

He'd examined plenty of laboratory animals in his time and

understood the expression 'to fight like a cornered rat'. His empirical evidence was holding good outside the laboratory, it seemed. He was cornered and he intended to fight.

The Admiral looked at the middle-aged man who walked steadily and defiantly into the room. What he saw was a shabbily and casually dressed individual in baggy trousers and an overlarge jumper. There was nothing about the man, on first sight, to impress. He saluted sloppily and seemed to disregard the formalities as a waste of time. The Admiral wondered why a local Doctor with years of back-country experience behind him would suddenly wish to seek active service on a Starship. No doubt others had asked that question. The man must have replied to their satisfaction or he would not have reached the interview stage - the final stage in the appointment process for Doctors wishing to serve in Starfleet. The majority of candidates were going to medical school for the first time, and would take five years to qualify. A few, like this man, were already qualified Doctors but needed an additional year's training in xenobiology and other areas not usually covered by Earth medicine.

The Admiral flicked through the papers before him. They gave few clues. Then his eyes lighted on something interesting.

"Country Doctor cures disease that baffled university scientists."

The headline was an extract from the Georgia Herald, a local newspaper. He read the short article below it. McCoy, it seemed, had found a cure for a disease contracted only in the remotest areas of Federation space. How had a local country Doctor, with no experience of other planets, diagnosed such a thing?

The Admiral forgot the questions he'd been prepared to ask - the obvious ones like "Why join Starfleet so late in your career?". The Federation in general, and Starfleet in particular, was short of good Doctors. That is, really good Doctors who could work with different species and diagnose unusual diseases. Instead he asked a question that got straight to the point and unlocked the hidden talents of the middle-aged man before him.

"How did you diagnose Ralentis Fever in the case of Michael Loadstone three years ago, Doctor?"

McCoy forgot his nervousness. He swallowed the pat answers he had ready for the well-rehearsed questions about a qualified Doctor seeking active service at his time of life. He even forgot he was being interviewed.

"An interesting case. Temperature of 105 degrees. Tossing and turning like a madman - but not a drop of sweat to be seen on him. Nothing we tried would break that fever. We used all the latest antibiotics and a few local remedies dating back to time immemorial. Then Bob Chase mentioned that the man was a trader. I realised then that he couldn't be suffering from any normal Human disease. I backtracked and discovered he'd been serving on an ore freighter. I got the flight path from the ship's log and there it was. Annahove."

"Annahove?" queried the Admiral. "What is significant about Annahove? It is a pleasure planet, isn't it?"

"That's right. A pleasure planet on the trading routes to the far corners of the galaxy. I checked out the area and Ralentis was one of the nearby planets. As soon as I realised that I knew it had to be Ralentis fever. Of course that was only the beginning. There are several cures for Ralentis fever, but not all of them work on a Human being. It was the third concoction I brewed up that finally did the trick."

"But how did you know? You haven't left Earth other than for the occasional medical conference."

"I may not have left Earth, but that doesn't mean I don't keep up to date. Even in Georgia we get all the latest medical journals and my computer is constantly updated with information from all over the galaxy. I'd not be much of a Doctor if I only examined what happened on Earth. Even in Georgia we get the occasional visitor. I've treated Andorians and Rigellians and even a Vulcan over the years. I'm not an expert in non-Human medicine. My speciality is Human surgery. But I'm not an ignoramus either."

The Doctor looked outraged at the thought, and the Admiral swallowed a smile.

"How did you concoct the antidote once you'd realised it was Ralentis fever?"

McCoy considered the question.

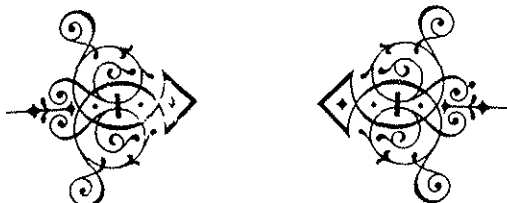
"Intuition, I guess. A doctor gets a feel for such things."

The interview was over

"Congratulations, Doctor McCoy. You just made Starfleet Medical School. You'll be on a Starship within the year."

As the now transformed, smiling Doctor left the interview room in a daze the Admiral wrote a note on his papers.

"Recommended for active service in Starfleet after completion of training. Main expertise in Human surgery but this man will be capable of dealing with all races. I believe the Enterprise's Doctor is due to retire in a year's time. McCoy could be an excellent replacement, bearing in mind the requirement to doctor a Vulcan Science Officer. Vulcan anatomy and physiology should be included as standard courses in his training."



# FOUNDATIONS

by

Teresa Abbott

Still the nightmares.

Still the grief and pain.

James T. Kirk allowed the cabin door to slide shut behind him and leaned back wearily against the cold metal panels, grateful for the temporary isolation from the bustling normality of the rest of the ship.

Alone in the darkened cabin, he felt no need to order on the lights. What for, when he could see in his mind's eye each tiny detail in the room, the clothes scattered untidily amongst the books and other personal possessions? If he listened hard enough he could half imagine the sound of remembered voices and laughter. After all, he had lost track of the number of hours he had spent within these walls, finding in them a refuge from the pressures of command, and a haven for rest and relaxation.

Here, where no-one else could see him, Kirk finally allowed the overwhelming sense of loss to come again to the surface.

Gary!

A month now since his friend's death. Not a month since their final conflict on Delta Vega, but a month since the Enterprise had attempted to cross the energy barrier at the edge of the universe. That was the moment from which Kirk measured the loss of his friend. What had existed after that time was an obscenity, a mutation. He had to believe that, and go on believing it, or how would he ever come to terms with the fact that Gary had died at his hands?

Kirk's mind touched reluctantly on the events of the last few weeks. Time had sped on remorselessly, and there had been little time to face up to the situation. The Enterprise had picked him up from Delta Vega, then made its way slowly to Starbase 6 to effect repairs. Scott and his team had patched up the ship very effectively, but a lot of work still needed to be done.

Once they were in orbit around the base, Kirk had beamed down alone to deal with the painful task of debriefing, and sending messages to Gary's family and friends. McCoy, rejoining the ship to take over from Dr. Piper, had offered to go with him, but Kirk knew this was one task Gary would have wanted him to attend to personally, although he found the experience very distressing.

Overwhelmed with grief and guilt, a night out in the base's entertainment area had done little to blot out the memories. What he needed was time to accept the situation. Unfortunately, the Enterprise had been ordered to pick up Nurse Chapel and head immediately for Exo III to search for Roger Korby, and there had been no time for a proper period of mourning.

Now the Enterprise was headed back for the base, this time for a longer period of R & R. In less than an hour they would be in orbit, and Gary's room would be reassigned. A chapter of his life had come to an end, and Kirk knew he had to come finally to terms with what had happened, and make his final farewell.

Anxiously Kirk rubbed his eyes. The pain in his head had increased as he had thought about the past few weeks, as it always seemed to do of late, and deep within him a knot of unacknowledged fear grew a little larger.

"Message coming in from Starbase, sir."

Uhura's precise voice startled Spock out of his unaccustomed reverie.

"On screen, Lieutenant." There was no indication in the Vulcan's voice that for once his mind had been on things other than his duties.

"It's a personal message for Captain Kirk, sir, classified for his eyes only. Shall I page the Captain?"

Uncharacteristically, Spock hesitated. He had more than a fair idea of where the Captain would be, but was strangely unwilling to voice his suspicions publicly to the bridge crew. Precisely why he should be so sure of the Captain's whereabouts, when logically he had no way of knowing them, was the question he had been reluctantly thinking about at the time of Uhura's interruption.

Belatedly Spock realised that his delay in answering was in itself giving rise to speculation. "Put me through to Commander Mitchell's cabin, Lieutenant." As soon as he said the words he regretted them, seeing that the woman understood the implications behind the order only too well. Mindful as ever of his feelings, however, she made the connection without comment.

The flashing light of the intercom stabbed through the darkness. Angry at the intrusion, Kirk ordered on the lights. The room was, of course, completely empty, having been readied for the replacement crewman they were to pick up during their stopover.

Annoyed at himself for allowing such a wallow in emotion, Kirk activated the screen, and felt a curious mixture of resentment and gratitude as he realised that his Vulcan First Officer had guessed where he could be found.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" His voice was unintentionally hard as he determinedly fought down the feelings of loss he had been immersed in. "What's so important that it can't wait?"

"Personal message from the Starbase, sir. Will you take it there?"

"Put it through, Mr. Spock." Kirk was keying in his personal identification even as the Vulcan's image faded from the screen.



The headaches had started not long after Gary's death. Kirk remembered that he had come back on board the Enterprise after their brief stop at the Starbase with a debilitating hangover, and ever since then he had been plagued with the headaches incessantly. He had attributed them to stress, to grief, to anxiety. He had steadfastly refused to acknowledge the irrational fear that he, too, might have been affected in some way by the energy charge that had transformed Gary and Elizabeth Dehner.

Anxious not to alarm McCoy, Kirk had not asked for any treatment, although on one occasion he had managed to find Nurse Chapel alone and had persuaded her to give him some medication.

His problems ceased after the incident on Exo III. He managed to convince McCoy that the process of android duplication had left him with these residual pains, and the Doctor thought that sufficiently likely to allow him the medication. McCoy also ran a complete physical, which did much to allay Kirk's fears, but did not totally eradicate them.

The headache returned with a vengeance now, as Kirk read and reread the brief message with disbelief.

...PERSONAL AND PRIVATE FOR JAMES T. KIRK ONLY...  
CODE M9521506/A

Jim. Please contact me immediately Starbase 6 Room 109.  
The older two boys are in terrible danger and I  
desperately need your help.

Sam.

Kirk was puzzled and worried. What was his brother doing on Starbase 6? Last time he had seen him, Sam had been...

Kirk's thoughts tailed off as, momentarily confused, he was unable to remember just where he had last seen his brother. Then the incident came clearly to his mind. Of course. Sam had seen him off from Earth on this mission, with his wife and three sons.

Anxiously, Kirk contacted the Starbase communications centre and asked to be put through to room 109. Sam's face appeared on the screen almost immediately. His brother looked thinner and more haggard than Kirk remembered, but his relief on seeing the Captain was unmistakeable.

"Jim! Thank goodness you got my message. I couldn't believe it when I heard the Enterprise was coming here. I desperately need your help!"

"What's the problem, Sam? What are you doing on Starbase 6?" Kirk knew he sounded very formal, but for some reason he found the situation disturbing.

"Jim, I can't talk to you like this. The two older boys have gone missing, and I can't go after them alone. I'll tell you all the details when I see you, but we must act quickly. Please, Jim, if family means anything to you, you must come and help me."

Kirk considered. "All right. I've got some leave owing. I'll talk it over with..."

"No!" Sam interrupted him urgently. "Please don't tell anyone

about this. You'll understand why when I see you. I'm not joking when I say that it's a matter of life and death."

Before Kirk could answer the connection was cut, and the image of his brother's face faded from the screen.

Usually a decisive man, Kirk was this time undecided. Instinct made him want to beam down to the base to see his brother immediately, but logic warned against the advisability of going down alone to what might turn out to be a difficult situation. Sam had asked him not to speak of this to anyone, but surely he could tell someone he could trust completely.

Automatically, his mind turned to Spock. Recently he had found himself becoming more and more dependent on the Vulcan for help and advice. Close as he had been to Gary, he had not been blind to the younger man's faults, and the Vulcan's quiet, unspoken support, so different from Gary's sometimes over-the-top teasing, had gone a long way towards helping him get through the last four weeks.

People had warned him, on taking command of the Enterprise, that he would find the Vulcan difficult to get on with, and unfriendly. Kirk had never found that to be the case. All he saw was a quiet, reserved man, who perhaps reflected the very feelings that he himself had often felt. Even before Gary's death he had found himself at ease with Spock in a way that he had never been with Gary. He was aware that the Vulcan had personal problems dealing with relationships, but had soon noticed that at least when they were alone Spock would be less reserved.

Intellectually, they were well matched. Kirk had never made many friends at the Academy, as his quick mind and obviously superior intelligence had bred resentment among many of his classmates. In Spock he had found a mind superior to his own. At first overawed by the Vulcan's mental capacity, he had quickly realised that logical analysis was not always a substitute for instinct, and their chess games had quickly become a pleasant sparring ground for both of them - and a continual topic of conversation for the crew. Surely, now, Spock would be the one to help him.

Mind made up, Kirk reached for the intercom - and hesitated. Had he any right to ask the Vulcan to become involved in his personal problems? It would be asking Spock for a commitment which the Vulcan might not yet be willing to make. Perhaps he was wrong altogether in reading the Vulcan in such Human terms. Recently he had noticed an increased reticence in his First Officer; a withdrawal into formal politeness. Maybe he was imagining friendship where there was only Vulcan duty because of his own need for a companion with whom he could share the burden of Command.

Sighing, Kirk left the switch untouched and rose to leave the room. This was one problem he would have to deal with by himself. If only the pain in his head would go away so he could think.

Spock leaned back in the command chair and resumed instructions for the routine approach to the Starbase, but his mind was once again perplexed by the Captain's attitude. It would seem that he, Spock, had erred again. He ran through the short conversation in his mind, trying to pinpoint exactly what could have annoyed the Captain.

Had it been wrong to go straight through to Commander Mitchell's cabin? He was reluctant to admit to himself that he had not had the Captain paged in an attempt to protect Kirk's privacy. How had he known where Kirk would be? His ability to sense and understand the Captain's actions stirred up problems that Spock was increasingly unable to put off analysing.

The turbolift door slid open and McCoy stepped onto the bridge. Spock was uncomfortably aware of his own relief that the Doctor had not been present a few moments ago. Spock had not known the Doctor long, but already he knew that, unlike Uhura, McCoy would not have been able to let such an opportunity for comment pass by.

The Enterprise assumed orbit around the Starbase without any problems. Spock dealt with all the necessary formalities. When, at the end of that time, there was still no word from the Captain, Spock found himself getting restless. If the message was of importance to the Enterprise or its crew he knew Kirk would have informed him of its contents. If it was purely personal, there was no reason for Kirk to involve anyone else, and yet... it was unlike the Captain to remain away from the bridge for so long a time.

Spock considered the situation. He was reluctant to become involved. He and the Captain functioned extremely well as Commander and Second-in-Command, but during the last few weeks Spock knew that the line which defined that relationship had become dangerously blurred, and threatened to dissolve into what Humans called BS

'friendship'. Spock had made several attempts at such friendships many years ago, and had learned his lesson the hard way. He was not prepared to lower his Vulcan defences again.

Despite this, when after a further ten minutes there was still no sign of the Captain, Spock found himself in the turbolift heading for Mitchell's quarters without being aware of having made a conscious decision. At the end of the corridor he hesitated. This was illogical. If he were needed the Captain would inform him. He had learned very early on in their acquaintance that Kirk would never neglect his duty to his ship or his crew.

Having made the decision not to stop by the cabin, Spock was therefore startled when the door suddenly slid open and the Captain came out.

"Spock!" Kirk's voice was strained, but his pleasure on seeing the Vulcan was obvious. "I was thinking about calling you. Walk with me to my quarters."

They entered the turbolift in silence. The Vulcan, caught up in his self-analysis, failed to notice the lines of strain on his Commander's face.

Outside Kirk's rooms the Captain turned to Spock. "Will you come in for a while? I've got a rather personal problem I could use some advice on."

The Vulcan hesitated. He decided that for both their sakes he would have to re-draw the line. "I'm sorry, sir, but there are matters on the bridge I must attend to. If there is nothing in the message that concerns the Enterprise, perhaps we could discuss it another time?" He almost faltered at the look on Kirk's face; he had not meant to hurt, just to clarify where he stood.

"Very well, Mr. Spock. You're dismissed." There was no anger in Kirk's voice, just sadness and... pity?

Their eyes locked briefly across the corridor, but it was the Vulcan who eventually lowered his gaze.

Later that evening Spock ordered on the lights in his room in exasperation. Despite strenuous efforts, it would seem that tonight he was unable to calm his thoughts to the level necessary for meditation. Keeping the room lighting low was pointless, because the cause of his disturbance was not in this room.

Spock finally admitted to himself that he had acted unfairly in his dealings with the Captain. How difficult it was for him to admit that! Yet the need for truth could no longer be denied, and he knew that recently he had repaid the Captain's openness with nothing but formality and impoliteness.

Reluctantly, Spock faced the fact that he was having problems with that very side of his nature he had tried so long to suppress. The years he had spent with Christopher Pike had provided him with a safe haven in which to hide, and the Vulcan was horrified to find that all that passage of time had done nothing to sort out the difficulties that had driven him to Starfleet in the first place.

Intellectually he had grown over the past few years, his scientific research and discoveries making his a name known throughout the Federation. Pike had never made emotional demands on him, and they had respected each other's privacy. Spock realised now that the doubts and uncertainties that had plagued him in his youth were not resolved; they had merely been ignored and pushed to a part of his mind where he did not have to deal with them. How was he to solve his own dilemma if he could not even voice it to others?

He remembered with shame an earlier conversation with Kirk. His own 'The fact that one of my ancestors married a Human female', and Kirk's gently mocking 'Terrible, having bad blood like that.' Illogical to be reluctant to admit that it was his own father who had made such a marriage!

Recently, Spock knew, he had allowed his control to slip. How many times had he found himself in the recreation room watching Kirk and his circle of friends, feeling isolated and withdrawn from the proceedings? Then the Captain would turn to him and smile, searching him out and drawing him into the conversation. Spock could not deny the unexpected pleasure at such incidents, and knew that Kirk was aware of his involuntary response.

Their chess games, too, surprised him. He knew there were those among the crew who assumed that the Vulcan always won. It was their mistake, as it had been his, to underestimate Kirk. The fact that despite the Captain's youth and illogic, it was never a certainty which of them would win, also wound its spell around Spock.

The Vulcan decided now that all those situations would have to stop. The Captain would have to be made to understand that he would not allow himself any personal involvements. To do so would mean a destruction of the wall which he had built around himself so painstakingly over so many years. That did not mean, however, that he had to be impolite. The Captain had treated him with nothing but

fairness. Even at the height of the crisis over Mitchell, Kirk had defended Spock before Elizabeth Dehner, and had taken Spock's advice to strand Gary, even though it was obvious it cost him dearly. After the incident on Delta Vega Spock had expected coldness, but the Captain had never borne him any grudge.

Would it not have been logical, then, to agree to help the Captain with his problem tonight, instead of turning him away? Spock decided that in the morning he would implement his policy of emotional non-involvement, but would couple it with a more helpful approach to the Captain, and offer his assistance.

What he didn't ask himself was exactly why it should matter so much that there was no animosity between them.

Unknown to Spock, Jim Kirk had also made a decision, and having done so saw no reason to delay putting his plans into action. He had plenty of leave owing to him. Surely it was worth at least investigating what Sam wanted, in view of the urgency of the message?

Briefly Kirk considered calling McCoy to discuss the situation. The Doctor's reaction, however, would not be as unpredictable as the Vulcan's had been, and Kirk had no doubt that the Doctor would not be in favour of his taking any further action before a more thorough investigation could be made. With family at stake, Kirk did not feel that he could afford to take the time.

A couple of calls to the base, and he had acquired the necessary permission to beam down for a 24 hour leave period. He leaned towards the intercom, instinctively planning to inform his First Officer of his intended whereabouts. Then bitterly he reflected that the Vulcan had made it perfectly clear that he didn't give a damn about the Captain's personal life, and stayed his hand.

Still, he made a recording of the emergency message and of his plans, slipping the tape into his personal locker just in case. Then calling Scott, and placing him in command until Spock's shift started, Kirk made for the transporter room.

Starbase 6 was one of the largest Federation bases, servicing as it did a thinly populated, often highly disputed region of space. As such it carried a higher than usual complement of military personnel, as well as having extensive repair bays and recreational facilities for the many ships that stopped there, often after long months in space without a break.

It also played host to the usual assortment of dubious personnel, mostly small-time traders whose operations frequently came close to breaking the rules, but who were largely ignored as long as they didn't directly jeopardise Federation security.

It was because of the excellent repair facilities that the Enterprise had come here after its disastrous attempt to cross the energy barrier a month previously.

Kirk felt a twinge of guilt as he passed through the entertainment area. He knew there was really no need to feel guilty. McCoy would say that he had had more than good enough



reasons for wanting to drown his sorrows on his previous visit. It was just that he usually liked to know at least something about the women he slept with. This time he was embarrassed to realise that not only did he not remember the girl's face or name, but he couldn't even remember the room in which he had spent the night.

Putting such thoughts behind him, Kirk headed directly for Room 109. He found it in an anonymous-looking corridor, in an equally anonymous section of the base's visitors' area. The door slid open as he pressed the entry button, and his brother eagerly pulled him into the room.

"Jim, thank heavens you're here! You took so long, I thought perhaps you'd changed your mind."

Sam looked tired and tense, and uncharacteristically pulled Kirk to him in a fierce embrace. "Sit down, Jim - I'll get you a drink."

Sam poured him a glass of some pale-looking alcohol, then sat down nervously on the edge of his chair. "Jim, you can't believe how worried I've been. I realise now that I've acted stupidly, but at the time it seemed okay."

Kirk swallowed his drink. The liquid seemed to spread a warmth through his veins, and dissipated the headache he could feel building up behind his eyes.

"Calm down, Sam - you're not making any sense. Start at the beginning and tell me the whole story."

His brother sat back with a sigh. "When I last saw you I was still on Earth, hoping for a transfer to Colony 2. Shortly after you left I received instructions that the transfer had come through, but they wanted me to detour via Starbase 6 to take part in a scientific conference here.

"Aurelan and I decided that the boys would stay with her, and they would all meet me directly on Colony 2, but the two older boys asked me to take them along. George, the eldest, was particularly upset at the delay, and in the end I couldn't see any reason not to take them. Both George and Alexander were growing up fast, and were anxious for their first glimpse of real space. I thought it would be a treat for them and a break for Aurelan. We decided that Peter would be better left on Earth with her, as he'd recently had a respiratory infection, and we didn't want to tire him. Surely, Jim, you remember how persuasive the boys can be?"

Kirk did indeed remember. He had the same affection for all three of his brother's sons, and could remember them all coming to the spaceport to see him off just a few months ago.

"Okay, so what's the problem?"

"We arrived here on schedule," continued Sam. "The conference finished a few days ago. We were supposed to ship out sometime this week. Then I met these two traders who do a lot of travelling in this sector, and became quite friendly with them. Mike, the older one, offered to take the boys for an observation flight past a planet called Orelia, a short distance from here. The boys begged to be allowed to go, feeling it would make them real space explorers. Like a fool, I let them - at the time I could see no harm in it.

"Anyway, we've heard nothing from them for two days. The Base Command says they've scanned the planet, and there's no sign of Human life, so they've written them off as perished in space. But I've got to know what happened to them. The trader's partner, Dave, is just as upset, but neither of us has the necessary authority to take a shuttlecraft out there. You, as a Starship Captain, could do that. We could pay a quick visit to the planet and determine for ourselves what happened. I didn't want anyone else to know about this because Base Command will think I'm countermanding their authority."

Kirk had tried to listen to all that his brother was saying, but the pain in his head suddenly became worse. He tried to hold the picture of Sam's boys in his mind and decide rationally what he should do, but he couldn't think straight. Then nausea caught him unprepared, and he made it to the bathroom just in time. He was alarmed to find his vision blurred and misty. Dimly he was aware of Sam taking him by the arm and leading him back to his chair. His skin felt clammy, and leaning back he closed his eyes against the throbbing in his brain.

"Jim! Jim, what's the matter? You didn't tell me you were ill."

With an effort Kirk summoned a smile. "I'm not ill, it's just a headache. I'll be okay in a minute."

"Shall I call a doctor? It's Doctor Piper on your ship, isn't it?"

Kirk opened his eyes and looked at Sam. "It's McCoy. He joined us again two weeks ago. I thought I wrote you."

"I'd probably left Earth by then and missed your letter. Here, take these." His brother shook two tablets out of a bottle and passed them to Kirk with a glass of water.

Kirk looked at them suspiciously. "What are they?"

Sam laughed. "What do you mean, what are they? They're tablets to get rid of your headache. They may not be the ones you normally take, but I've always found them very good. Now take them, or I'll call the Doctor."

Unwilling yet to involve McCoy, Kirk swallowed the pills, then allowed Sam to persuade him to lie down for a while in the bedroom. he was clearly of no use to his brother in the state he was in.

The tablets must have helped, because the next thing Kirk knew he was waking up and feeling much better. The headache had completely gone, and he wondered now why he had ever had doubts about Sam's plan. Of course they must go after the boys. His status as an officer gave him authority to use the Base shuttlecraft. They would be back long before his 24 hour leave period was over.

Hearing voices in the other room, Kirk got up and went to the door, to find Sam talking to another man.

"Jim, come in. I'm glad to see you're looking better. This is Dave, the trader I told you about."

Kirk shook the man's hand. The trader was of nondescript appearance, and there was nothing about him to arouse suspicion, but Kirk disliked him on sight. Not wanting to upset his brother, however, he did not allow his feelings to show.

Sam was impatient. "Have you decided, Jim? Will you help us?"

Slowly, Kirk nodded.

"Right, said Sam. "We'll go at once. I've got together all the things we'll need."

Dave went out of the door, and as Sam made to follow Kirk held him back by the arm.

"Sam, what do you know about this man? Are you sure he's trustworthy?"

Sam shook off Kirk's hand indignantly. "Look, Jim, whether we like him or not is irrelevant. He's the best chance we have of finding George and Alexander. Now, are you coming or not?"

Leaving the room, he left Kirk to follow doubtfully.

They acquired a shuttlecraft without any problems. Kirk filled in all the necessary forms and soon they were heading towards Orelia. Kirk took the controls, setting the coordinates of the planet on the computer.

After half an hour, much to Kirk's annoyance - and, he admitted, his fear - he felt he couldn't pilot the ship any longer. The headache had come back with a vengeance, and he knew he would be endangering all their lives by continuing at the helm. He tried to make light of the situation. "Take over, will you, Dave? I'll sit in the back for a while."

Sam looked at him eagerly. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Kirk brushed the concern aside. "I'll take over again as soon as we come in to land."

He rose to move to the back, and swayed as a wave of nausea caught him again. Losing his footing he stumbled, hitting his already aching head a glancing blow on one of the bulkheads. The resulting pain exceeded anything that he had ever known before. He tried not to cry out, and wondered dimly if he was having a stroke. His vision faded to near darkness, and he could hear someone calling to him as if from a great distance.

Then he knew he was in a chair. It felt as though something... gave way... in his brain, and after what seemed like an eternity the pain began to lessen. Kirk opened his eyes, then, to look into Sam's face.....

.....and saw a stranger bending over him.

If ever Kirk knew sheer terror he knew it then. Only pure instinct saved him. He closed his eyes tightly, fearful of what they might show, but inwardly he was screaming as reality disintegrated around him. He could feel his heart racing, and the sweat standing out cold on his skin, and it was fortunate for him

that all those symptoms could be passed off as part of the attack.

"I'm okay." His mouth was dry, and he never knew how he managed to get the words out. "Let me rest for a while, and I'll be okay."

The... man... went away, and for a long time Kirk sat there, leaning back in his chair, caught up in a nightmare in which he was no longer sure what was real or unreal.

How could it be that that man was not Sam?

More important, why had he thought it was his brother?

Or perhaps it really was Sam, and the pain in his head had destroyed his memory and finally driven him insane. Why could he still see George and Alexander in his mind, although a little voice whispered that they had never even existed?

Unable to think clearly, unable to concentrate, Kirk faintly made out the voices of the two men at the controls.

"Is he asleep? Do you think he suspects?" It was Dave who spoke.

"I think it'll be all right." The second man's voice didn't even sound like his brother's now.

"He's resting, and will probably be out of action for some time. Now's as good a time as any to alter the coordinates."

Kirk's fear increased with those words. Beyond Orelia lay vast uncharted regions of Klingon space. Insane or not, he would not let them take him or the shuttlecraft out of Federation territory.

With an effort he focussed his mind and recalled the coordinates he had set for Orelia. Then he bided his time. He was almost beginning to think that a chance would never come when Dave got up and went past him into the small room at the back to get some drinks.

Knowing he would never get a better opportunity, Kirk threw himself out of the chair at the man who had been his brother, and knocked him to the deck. Even as he set the coordinates for Orelia again Dave came bursting into the control area, drawn by the commotion. Kirk barely had time to lock in the coordinates and the automatic pilot so that they could not be changed before something hit him on the back of the head, and the next thing he was aware of was the spiralling of the universe as the shuttlecraft headed erratically for the planet's surface.

The next morning Spock arrived early on the bridge of the Enterprise, still driven by the new - to him - compulsion to somehow put things right between himself and the Captain. Before the turbolift doors had closed behind him, however, he knew that something was very wrong.

Scott was in the command chair, but rose immediately on seeing the Vulcan enter the bridge. "Mr. Spock, the Captain asked me t'inform ye that he's beamed down to the Starbase, and that I was in command till ye came on duty."

Spock refused to allow his eyebrows to rise. This was unprecedented. Everyone on the bridge knew that although there was no rule to say it, it was an unspoken courtesy that the Captain should inform the First Officer personally before leaving the ship.

Thanking the Engineer, Spock calmly took his place in the command chair. If he was aware of confusion and disappointment at this turn of events, he would not allow the bridge crew to see it.

The first message came in barely minutes later, an impersonal voice heedless of the confusion it caused.

"Starbase Command to Enterprise. You will remain in orbit, take no unauthorised actions, and await further instructions. Base out."

Spock's unease grew. Why should the Base anticipate the Enterprise taking unauthorised action, unless its Captain was in trouble?

The bridge crew worked on quietly, but the silence was deafening in its eloquence. The Base Commander came on screen just as they were all beginning to wonder who would be the first to break the silence.

"This is Starbase Commander Sampson to the Starship Enterprise. I must inform you that Captain Kirk has been relieved of command, being suspected of high treason against the Federation, and of defecting to the Klingon Empire. Mr. Spock will take charge temporarily, and I request his presence in my office immediately. Starbase out."

There was uproar on the bridge. Spock stood up, and was dismayed to find his heart beating faster. His voice, however, retained its authority.

"That will be enough!"

The hubbub subsided as though cut off.

"Speculation is pointless without any facts. Mr. Scott, you have the con. I must report to the Commander's office at once."

He reached the turbolift without any outward show of emotion. Only then did he allow himself to remember Kirk's plea for advice the night before. With hindsight, he wondered how he could have missed the obvious strain in Kirk's voice and manner. By the time he reached the transporter room the seeds of guilt had taken solid root and flourished.

Once on the Base Spock was taken under escort to Command Headquarters. Commander Sampson was waiting, and was visibly an extremely angry man. Ordering the guards to leave he faced the Vulcan across the desk.

"Mr. Spock, do you know where your Captain is?"

Spock hesitated, sensing that his answer was important. "I believe that Captain Kirk beamed down to the Starbase yesterday evening. I would assume that he is still here."



The Commander sat back. "Well, Mr. Spock, you are wrong. Captain Kirk did indeed beam down yesterday evening, ostensibly for a 24 hour leave period. On arriving here he went directly to the visitors' quarters, and met with two men in what was obviously a prearranged rendezvous. The three of them then took a shuttlecraft, using Kirk's authority as a Starship Captain, and headed immediately for the Klingon Empire. Witnesses who saw him say that at no time was he under any duress.

"Your Captain has betrayed both himself and the Federation in what was clearly a cold-blooded, premeditated plan. We cannot begin to estimate the damage that could have been done to Federation security. We can only be thankful that they didn't make it into Klingon space alive."

The Commander's final statement hit Spock like a physical blow. It was several seconds before he could speak.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand. What exactly has happened to the Captain?"

Sampson glanced at him curiously, detecting something in the tone. "The shuttlecraft they were travelling in disappeared from our sensors long before it reached Klingon territory. It probably disintegrated in space due to a malfunction. There is only one barely habitable planet in the vicinity; naturally we scanned in it case the vessel attempted to land there, but there are no humanoid life form readings present. We must assume that all three men are dead. It is probably better for your Captain that he is."

Spock tried to remain calm. "But you do intend to send a search party to make sure?"

The Commander was clearly annoyed. "No, Mr. Spock, we don't. Your attitude surprises me. You obviously have a very poor relationship with Captain Kirk - it's normal practice for a Captain to inform his First Officer before leaving his ship, but despite your attempts to cover up you obviously didn't have the slightest idea of Kirk's whereabouts. Given these circumstances, even if none of this had happened Starfleet Command would probably have considered transferring one of you to another ship. The Federation isn't going to tolerate personality clashes on its Starships."

Spock could not help himself. "No... I am extremely... content... on the Enterprise, and I believe I have a good working relationship with its Captain. I did not know the Captain's precise whereabouts as I understood him to be dealing with personal matters. He received a message implying as much yesterday afternoon."

The Commander stood up impatiently. "The message was obviously a prearranged signal to tell Kirk to come here. In any case, as far as you are concerned the matter is closed. You will take command of the Enterprise until such time as a suitable replacement for Kirk can be found."

Spock tried again. "May I have a look at the room in which the Captain met these men? And may I at least know who they were?"

Sampson shook his head. "I'm sorry, that won't be possible. Starfleet Security is already dealing with the investigation. I suggest you return to the Enterprise and inform the crew of what has happened."

Spock didn't press the point. He knew he could probably bypass the Base computers and obtain the information directly from the Enterprise. However, he too had one more thing to say. Before leaving he stood and faced the Commander determinedly.

"Sir, may I state for the record that Captain Kirk would give his life rather than willingly betray the Federation. His ship means everything to him, and he would never endanger it. I believe that unless matters are looked into further, a gross miscarriage of justice may take place."

Sampson smiled grimly. "Thank you for your opinion, Mr. Spock. It's a shame that Kirk will never know of your loyalty."

With those bleak words, the Vulcan was free to go.

Noise.

Over and over again, persistent.

Impinging on his senses and forcing a return to consciousness.

Awareness flooded back, and with it pain and confusion as Kirk fought to remember who and where he was.

Convulsively his hands gripped out, and he felt his fingers digging into soft mud. He was alive, then. On the ground. Face down on what felt like a damp, earthen floor.

Training took over as he fought to control his breathing, and his vision cleared enough to see the tangle of unknown grasses before his eyes. It hurt to breathe, and he felt light-headed and distanced from his surroundings due to loss of blood. He knew that he was badly hurt and shouldn't move.

But the noise was there again, a scraping and a slithering.

Tensing himself against the expected pain, Kirk forced himself to roll over onto his side and look around. The fear of insanity threatened as he recalled the last 24 hours, and he fought down panic to survey the scene before him.

The shuttlecraft had crashed among trees, and wreckage lay strewn over a wide area. He could see at once that there was nothing left to salvage with which to attempt to communicate with the Enterprise. Horrified, he realised for the first time how it would appear to High Command. He had taken a shuttlecraft and headed into Klingon territory with two accomplices. No-one would come to look for him. How could he have been so misguided? Why had he acted in so irresponsible a manner? Most important, why had he thought that man to be Sam?

Faintly, the noise came again, and focusing on the sound Kirk made out the bodies of two men lying among the grasses. Dave and... that man... lay unmoving, and as Kirk watched he saw with a sense of nightmare that the noise was made by strange vine-like plants that crawled and climbed over the injured men. Even as he watched, some of them started the slow approach up the hill towards him.

Was this, then, how his first command was going to end? Not usually prone to irrational thoughts, in his near-delirium he could

not prevent the thought that perhaps this was his punishment for having killed his closest friend.

Then the air seemed to shimmer before him, and Kirk watched in frozen terror as a figure climbed slowly out of what was left of the wreckage and started up the hill towards him. No silver in his friend's eyes now; just a look of compassion, and a desire to help.

"Don't be afraid, Jim. Let me help you." Gary's voice carried clearly through the still air.

Illusion? But such a seductive illusion, and so tempting to lie and wait...

At that moment rational thought failed, and survival instinct took over. It forced Kirk to his knees, then to his feet, and in blind terror he staggered away from Gary, and from Sam, ploughing through the trees until finally his legs gave way beneath him. Like a wounded animal searching for a place to die, he crawled through the undergrowth. Finding an opening in what looked like a grassy slope he dragged himself inside. Too far gone to realise that he was in some kind of man-made structure on a planet where there were no men, he inched himself away from the entrance and the echoes of his dead friend's voice, and collapsed on a metal slab in the far corner.

Spock went alone to Jim Kirk's cabin. He had beamed up from the Starbase barely minutes ago, and had headed for the Captain's quarters immediately, knowing that Dr. McCoy would not leave him alone once he learned that the Vulcan was back on board.

Spock did indeed want to speak to the Doctor, but not just yet. There were things he had to be sure of first.

Knowing that what he did was morally wrong, Spock keyed in the override and entered the Captain's rooms. A quick search did not reveal what he had come for. Spock sat down in one of the chairs and thought over the situation. The deep conviction that Kirk would not have left without a personal message remained with him. Considering the cold atmosphere between the two of them it did not seem logical, but the feeling persisted.

Finally Spock got up and reluctantly keyed in the entry code that would give him access to Kirk's personal effects. It was not obligatory for the Captain to divulge this number to anyone, and had Spock wished to do so he could have surmised a great deal from the simple fact that Kirk had trusted him with the information.

A few seconds later the Vulcan's guilt was somewhat lessened as he found what he had been looking for. The tape labelled 'Spock' was there, as he had subconsciously known it would be.

Activating the desk viewer, Spock inserted the tape immediately. Contrary to explaining the situation, however, its contents only worried him further. Eventually he decided that it was time to bring others into the situation; he could not make adequate progress alone. Taking the tape with him he relocked the personal safe and the cabin, and headed purposefully for sickbay.

The Doctor rose eagerly to greet him. "Spock! What did the Commander say? Did he give you a reason for all of this nonsense?"

"Indeed he did, Doctor." Briefly, Spock outlined the case against the Captain.

McCoy was stunned. "I don't believe it! Why should Jim do something so totally out of character? You would have thought he would at least have left some explanation as to why he acted as he did."

Spock hesitated. "He did, Doctor. When I returned to the Enterprise I found that the Captain had left me this tape. Unfortunately, it only makes the situation even more disturbing." He hoped that the Doctor would not realise that he had neglected to say just where the tape had been found.

McCoy was surprised. "He left it for you?"

The Vulcan glanced at him sharply. There was something in the tone... With a rare flash of insight Spock knew where the problem lay, and uncharacteristically sought to reassure the older man. "It was logical that he should do so. I am his second in command."

McCoy glared at him. He wanted to say that he didn't need Spock's reassurances, but that alone would refute the statement. Angered, he sat down. "Go ahead. Let's hear what Jim has to say."

He waited for Spock to insert the tape in the viewer, and listened in silence to its contents. When it had finished, he too was worried.

"What the devil's Jim talking about? His brother's only got one child. Have you spoken to Sam about this?"

Spock sighed. "As far as I can ascertain, I do not believe that the Captain's brother was ever on the Base. The Commander has denied me access to the Base computers, and would not tell me the identity of the two men, but I am sure that had one of them been Samuel Kirk he could not have avoided mentioning it."

"Then why would Jim believe that Sam was there? What does the message mean?"

Spock considered. "In my opinion it is one of two things. Firstly, the message the Captain ostensibly received from Sam could have been some kind of signal to make a prearranged rendezvous. That is what the Starbase Commander believes, and it will be difficult to disprove."

McCoy cut in, "Spock, even you can't believe that Jim would..."

"No, Doctor, I do not. At the moment, however, my other theory is only supposition."

"And your other theory is?" prompted McCoy.

Spock reached over and pointed to the viewer. "The message is preceded by a code. As far as I can ascertain, this code has no meaning. It is a random series of numbers, of no significance to anyone, unless..."

McCoy snorted impatiently.

"... unless they were to act as a subconscious trigger to someone's mind, to make them believe things that were not true."

The Doctor was aghast. "Are you implying that someone at some time in the past, *conditioned* Jim to believe that Sam had three sons in order to lure him away? How could that happen? Even if Jim believed it, once he got down to the Base he would see that Sam wasn't there, and yet you say he took the shuttlecraft quite willingly."

"Doctor, if he believed that his brother had three sons, he could also have been made to believe that a stranger was in fact Sam. If the conditioning began to weaken it could have been reinforced with medication." He forestalled the Doctor's protest. "I know you have advised the Captain only to take drugs prescribed by you; however, he would not suspect his brother of any treachery. Even if he was suspicious, the medication could have been administered in his food or drink."

McCoy was not convinced. "You forget, Spock, that Jim's received Command training. Any such attempt would be resisted subconsciously. Even if it worked it would probably give him horrific headaches trying to fight it. If that was the case, he would have told me."

Spock was silent for a moment. "That, Doctor, is the problem. We have no facts with which to back up these theories. Has the Captain been completely well lately?"

McCoy looked up. *So you don't know everything about Jim yet*, he thought silently, and was immediately ashamed of his jealousy. "He's had the odd headache or two, but they started after the android duplication process on Exo III, and were nothing serious. Anyway, I ran a complete physical on him just a short while ago."

Spock considered. "If there were any conditioning it must have been very slight, one fact only, so as not to be noticeable. It would have had to be recent, because the Captain's trained mind would fight it, and eventually overcome it. I will go and contact Samuel Kirk to eliminate him from the incident. I will also attempt to bypass the Base computer's security system, and find out more about the two men the Captain met on the Base. I suggest, Doctor, that you re-check the Captain's medical records, and we meet here again in one hour."

Both worried, they left to their separate tasks.

Nurse Christine Chapel looked up from the file on which she was working. Her hands were shaking. Sitting at her desk in the outer sickbay, she had been unable to help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy, and she knew she was in trouble.

Since the incident on Exo III she had not examined her memories of the event too closely, shutting them away into a part of her mind where they couldn't hurt her. Now it was as if a door had swung open, and like an old film replaying she could watch the incident, scene by scene.

Kirk: "Tell me about Sam?"

Android Kirk: "George Samuel Kirk is your brother. Only you call him Sam."



Kirk: "He saw me off on this mission."

Android Kirk: "Yes, with his wife and three sons."

Christine gasped. It was true, then. Rapidly she typed a code into the computer on the desk before her, calling up her official record of the incident. There was no mention of the conversation in the account. Either she had forgotten it, or had been too emotionally upset at the time to record it.

And the Captain's headaches...

She had joined the Enterprise to find a ship still in mourning for Commander Mitchell. Being herself caught up in the expectation of maybe seeing Roger again, she had felt at odds with the emotional feelings of the crew.

When the Captain had come to her one morning and confessed with a smile that he had a terrible hangover, she had hesitated. Her professionalism as a nurse told her to inform McCoy, but not knowing routine she had been reluctant to disturb the Doctor. Kirk had assured her that McCoy would not be interested in anything as trivial as a headache, and his charm had persuaded her to give him enough medication for a day or two until the effects wore off. He was, after all, her superior officer, and in command.

Chapel soon realised that on the Enterprise McCoy wanted to know everything that went on, and that included knowing about the Captain's hangovers. She had meant to tell him, but the incident had seemed so trivial. In addition, she had known that she would not make the same mistake again.

Now she realised she would have to confess. When Mr. Spock and the Doctor resumed their meeting in sickbay she approached them apprehensively.

"Doctor, may I speak with you for a moment?"

McCoy glanced up at her impatiently. "Can't it wait, Nurse? We've got urgent matters to discuss."

Chapel hesitated. "This is about the Captain, sir."

McCoy looked at her for a moment, and saw something in her face. "All right, Christine. Sit down."

She told them, then, about the medication she had given the Captain for severe headaches before the incident on Exo III, and also of Kirk's conversation with his replica.

"Why on earth didn't you mention this before?" McCoy was clearly angry.

Strangely, it was the Vulcan who offered comfort. He silenced the Doctor with a glance. "Thank you, Nurse Chapel. We appreciate your honesty in coming forward. The information you have given us will be of great help."

Feeling slightly better, Chapel rose and left the room.

When she had gone McCoy faced the Vulcan. "Well, I'm glad it's of help to somebody, Spock! What the devil's going on? What does it all mean?"

Spock sat back and steepled his fingers. "While you have been checking the medical records, Doctor, I have ascertained the following facts." He omitted to mention the problems he had had accessing the Base computer. "Samuel Kirk knows nothing about any of this, and is still on Earth with his wife and son awaiting transfer to a colony.

"The two men with whom the Captain met are traders, small-time operators who work the fringes of the Federation, and have been suspected of illegal trading and divided loyalties, although there is nothing proven against them. One of them, however, is on record as possessing a fair knowledge of hypnotism and mind control. The important thing is that they were both on the Starbase when we were last here for repairs.

"I suggest the following scenario.

"When the Captain beamed down alone to the base on our last visit, records show that he got drunk and spent the night with..." Spock hesitated "... female company."

McCoy sprang to Kirk's defence. "He was upset. His best friend had recently died. He was entitled to try and forget for a while."

"I am not blaming him, Doctor. I am merely suggesting that the traders might have used that opportunity to abduct the Captain for a few hours, and plant a suggestion in his mind which they could take advantage of later.

"They must have used sophisticated methods of mind control to convince him that one of the traders was his brother Sam, and that Sam had three sons. They then buried the idea deep in his subconscious where he would no longer be aware of it. When, some weeks later, they sent a message with an appropriate code, his subconscious recognised the code and the false memories became a reality to him."

McCoy was puzzled. "Why didn't they just take him there and then? Why the delay? It makes no sense."

"On the contrary, Doctor, it makes a great deal of sense. These men were not skilled criminals, but opportunists. They had the chance to get hold of a Starship Captain, and they did so. Their intention was probably to make contact with the Klingons and arrange to deliver the Captain for a price. They knew the Enterprise would be returning shortly, and hoped this would give them the necessary time to arrange a rendezvous. Also, to abduct him forcibly might be noticed. By making it appear that he went willingly, they did not come under any suspicion until they were well clear of the Base. As we have heard from the tape, they must have convinced him that Sam's non-existent older boys were in trouble and needed his help."

McCoy conceded, "All right, that I can accept. But why didn't Jim talk to anyone about it? He must have been in considerable pain from the subconscious resistance. And what about the incident on Exo III?"

"The incident on Exo III will be our proof for the authorities. The electrical impulses used in the android duplication process must have temporarily disrupted the Captain's thought patterns and accidentally triggered the planted memories.

This left him genuinely believing, for a short while, that his brother had three sons. The android picked up the falsehood, as it did the Captain's 'half-breed' warning to me. The Captain's memory probably returned to normal soon afterwards, and he would have been unaware of the discrepancy."

McCoy persisted, "That still doesn't explain why Jim didn't mention any of this to us. He must have known that we would have helped him..." McCoy tailed off as he saw the look on Spock's face. The Doctor's voice was dangerously quiet. "Did he say anything to you about this, Spock?"

The Vulcan looked down. It was some time before he spoke. "The Captain mentioned that he had a personal problem. He did not reveal to me what that problem was."

"Did you ask him?"

When there was no answer McCoy exploded, in his anger saying more than he should.

"He asked for your help, and you refused it? How're you going to live with yourself, Spock, if Jim's been killed, or taken by the Klingons? In case you hadn't realised it, he's come to rely on you a great deal for advice during the last few weeks, and yet you're saying now that you let him down?"

Spock pointedly ignored him. Leaning forward he punched some data onto the computer terminal, and a star map came up on the screen.

"Recriminations are pointless. Our task now must be to retrieve the Captain."

"They've been gone for hours. We'll never find them."

The Vulcan disregarded the comment. "The sensors on the Starbase have no record of the ship beyond here." He pointed to the map. "Either the ship was destroyed in some accident, or it was damaged and forced to crash land. There is only one Class M body in that area, and it is here." He enlarged the relevant section on the screen. "It is a planet about which little is known. Original sensor scans seemed to suggest a habitable world, but subsequent reports indicate that the environment is inhospitable, and not conducive to colonisation. If the shuttlecraft landed anywhere, it must be there."

McCoy realised then what the Vulcan was planning to do. "You're going after him? That's hardly a logical reaction, Spock. What are the chances of Jim being there alive?"

"On the contrary, Doctor, it is highly logical. And I am sure you don't really want to know the mathematical odds. Suffice it to say that there is a chance.

"I cannot afford to wait while Starfleet goes through official procedures. If the Captain is dead, my going will make no difference; if he is injured he will need help. If all three men survived, the Captain must be brought back before the other two can contact the Klingons for assistance."

McCoy could not resist. "Since when has guilt been a logical reason, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan got up and brushed past him out of the room. His face was bleak, and McCoy was left feeling that he had scored a very hollow victory.

The Doctor caught up with the Vulcan on the hangar deck. "Spock, I'm sorry. I had no right to say what I did. You're right that one of us must go after Jim, but you can't take that responsibility alone."

Spock accepted the apology with a nod. "Very well. What do you propose? Remember, time is of the essence."

"All right. Take the shuttlecraft and go and see what you can find. I'll tell Scotty the situation, and we'll try and cover for your absence. We'll also tell Starfleet Command about our theories, and hope to persuade them of the truth. Nurse Chapel's testimony should help to convince them. But whether it does or not, in twelve hours we'll come and get you."

They looked at each other with new understanding. Finally, Spock nodded.

"I will look forward to seeing you again, Doctor." And turning, he made for the waiting craft.

Jim Kirk lay on the cold metal slab onto which he had fallen and knew that he was going to die. He could feel the blood still seeping from his many wounds to congeal beneath him in pools on the alien metal surface. Strangely, he felt nothing but relief that the growingly insupportable pain would finally be at an end.

The events of the last month seemed to telescope in his mind, and the fear of insanity gripped him again as he realised he would never know the reason, now, for the events of the last few days.

First Sam, then Gary.

Had his mind finally snapped after the stresses of command, or had he also been affected in some subtle way by the energy charge that had caused Gary's transformation? If he was indeed insane, then better to die here than be forever locked away in some rehabilitation centre.

Yet he would have preferred not to die alone. If McCoy had been here he would have made it easier, both with his medication and with his company. And strangely enough, there was Spock...

Despite his pain a smile of regret touched his lips as he thought of his Vulcan First Officer. He knew, somehow, that despite all outward appearances the Vulcan would probably take his death the hardest. Kirk was aware of an immense sorrow that they had parted on such bitter terms. How he wished that the Vulcan had allowed his rigidly controlled barriers to drop, and accepted his own tentatively offered friendship. Now time had run out for both of them.

A faint slithering movement from somewhere on his right caused him to freeze in terror. He forced his ragged breathing to stop, and listened for the noise. He was aware that he could no longer

feel the cold in the room, and knew that for one of the first signs of approaching death, but the fear of being consumed by the moving plants galvanised him into action.

Gathering all his strength, he forced himself to roll over onto his side to try and see where the noise was coming from. The movement restarted the bleeding, and in his agony he knew that he had cried out. Unconsciousness threatened, and for a long moment he lay still, fighting for breath and for the mist to clear before his eyes. Finally his vision cleared, and he looked towards the entrance to the room...

... and saw, with utter disbelief, the Vulcan enter through the shadows of the doorway.

Kirk was aware of an overwhelming relief and gratitude that despite their disagreement Spock had come to look for him. He tried to say Spock's name, but his vocal chords would no longer respond to his bidding. He tried to reach out to his friend, but again his body would not obey him. A part of him accepted that this time even the Enterprise, with all of McCoy's skills, would not be enough to save him, but at least now he would die on his ship, surrounded by his friends, and he would not be alone.

The Vulcan slowly crossed the room towards him. His eyes were warm, and he was smiling the smile that Kirk had always hoped he would see one day. He spoke no words, yet Kirk could hear them clearly in his thoughts.

*//I will take away your pain.//*

There was amazement in Kirk's mind that the Vulcan could reach him thus with his thoughts, but no fear. He knew he trusted Spock completely, and was not afraid of what he would do.

The Vulcan reached out and rested his hands on Kirk's head, and the release from pain was so sudden, so absolute, that Kirk knew he cried out again. Then a warmth seemed to spread like a drug throughout his body, and Jim Kirk finally gave up fighting against the inevitable, and lapsed into welcome darkness.

Spock's shuttlecraft landed neatly and accurately in the clearing next to the wreckage. During his approach to the planet he had seen no reason why colonists had not settled there; from the air the unknown world appeared to be blessed with an environment Humans would have termed idyllic, a warm, untroubled climate, ample water, and an abundance of plant life growing in the rich soil.

The metallic remains of the other craft had been easy to pinpoint on his sensors, and Spock could not deny the cold pit in his stomach as he first surveyed the crash sight. It seemed inconceivable that anyone could have survived such an impact.

Spock found the bodies of the two men he knew to have been with Kirk almost immediately. He approached them warily, noting with apprehension the strange tangle of dead plants around them, wondering how the creepers had come to be there. The stalks were dry and brittle, and he removed them from the bodies with little difficulty. Tricorder readings of the corpses did not show any abnormal cause of death, which would appear to have been caused by multiple injuries at the time of impact.



A thorough search of the shuttlecraft remains and the surrounding area did not reveal the Captain. That did not mean that Kirk was alive, but it shifted the odds somewhat, and Spock's unacknowledged anxiety lessened a little.

"Over here, Spock! Over here!"

The sound of Kirk's voice made the Vulcan spin round in confusion. On the crest of a hill he could see the Captain waving and apparently unharmed. Spock's relief was absolute. It was also short-lived. It was inconceivable that the Captain would have left the men as they had fallen had he been well himself.

Warily the Vulcan scanned the area ahead with his tricorder. It registered no humanoid life readings. Rapidly Spock analysed the situation. Logically, this could be a trap. The figure on the hill was either an alien of a previously unknown race that could change its appearance and didn't register as a life form, or it was an illusion. Either way, whoever or whatever it was, it must have actually seen the Captain in order to be able to duplicate him. There was no choice but to follow.

Cautiously, Spock started up the slope, his phaser ready. As he approached the figure retreated, continually beckoning for the Vulcan to come after it. Aware that he was being drawn away from the landing site, Spock could see no alternative but to go on. When he stopped the illusion merely paused and waited for him to catch up.

After several hundred yards the figure picked up speed, and Spock's footsteps quickened. Then the figure stooped down and appeared to vanish into a grassy hillock. As Spock came nearer to the place where he had seen the figure disappear, he realised that he was standing outside some immeasurably ancient dome, of unknown metallic composition, which was completely overgrown with vegetation. In the wall beside him, almost completely obscured by forest growth, was a narrow opening. Cautiously Spock stooped to pass into the pace beyond...

... and stood, momentarily transfixed with horror at the sight before him.

The Captain lay in the corner of the room on what looked like a low metal table, and over his arms, his legs and his body grew a mass of plants. The green, tentacle-like strands entwined tightly over Kirk's body, each with many suckers that clung to his flesh.

Kirk's face was deathly white and peaceful, and for a second Spock's heart stopped within him as he thought the Captain dead. Then he noticed the slight rise and fall of the chest beneath the mass of leaves, and started forward, desperate to pull the strands away before they could do any more damage.

But halfway across the intervening space he staggered and fell to his knees as the pressure of what seemed like a thousand minds pressed on his mental shields, demanding entry. Shaken, confused, he tried to strengthen his mental defences, looking around him for the source of the intrusion. He became aware that the mental contact, though pressing, was not malevolent, and gradually, seeing no other option open to him, he began to lower his shields tentatively. Immediately he was aware of many voices in his mind, and needed all of his mental skills to make sense of the confusion.

//Who are you? Where are you?//

The answer was immediate, and with it came a feeling of relief. //You can hear us! You are not like the others.//

//Who are you?// Spock repeated.

The voices were joyful now. //We are Seeana. We were hoping that someone would come with whom we could communicate. The beings from the thing that landed here could not hear us, and were afraid.//

Still Spock did not fully understand, and he sensed their impatience.

//We are here. We are Seeana. We are maintaining the life energies of your fellow creature. We hoped that someone would come before we could no longer sustain him.//

Finally, then, Spock understood with a sense of wonder that he was hearing the mind-voices of the plants around the Captain. Slowly he stood up and made his way to the table, still finding it difficult to accept that the plants were friends, not enemies. The compulsion to tear the strands from Kirk's body was strong, but he could see now that the sucker-like leaves only touched lightly on the flesh. Spock did not need the tricorder to tell him that Kirk was badly hurt, and he was grateful that at least he did not appear to be in any pain.

Spock did not deny himself the need to reach out and feel for himself the steady beating of Kirk's heart. Whatever the plants were doing, they were at least keeping the Human alive. Finally accepting the situation, Spock opened his mind to them again.

//There were others in the craft that crashed. They too were injured. Could you not have helped them also?//

The voices this time were sad. //We are the Healers. We have existed here for as long as our communal memory knows. All life forms on this planet can communicate telepathically, and if any of them are injured and need our help, we go to them.

//The beings that fell from the sky could not hear us. We tried to help the others, but their life energy was too low. When they died, many of us died too, trying to maintain their life force.

//This one is also hurt, but we have been sustaining him, even though we cannot heal him as his structure is unknown to us. But we are preventing his life energy from draining away, and we are hoping to save him. We were pleased when we saw you. We recognised you from the image in his mind. We knew your instruments would not find him in this structure, so we provided the illusion to bring you here. If you do not help him soon, we will be unable to prevent him from ceasing to exist.//

Spock's concern increased with the last words. It would be several hours before the Enterprise came to look for them. Anger at his heritage welled with him; if he had been totally Human the Seeana could have taken the knowledge of structure and body chemistry from him.

Still, he decided, the idea was not a completely useless one. He was not a doctor, but he possessed a great deal of medical

knowledge. There was much the plants could learn from him. His decision made, he thrust his arms into the mass of leaves to facilitate communication, and spoke to them again.

*//I will open my mind to you fully. Take from it all that I know about Human anatomy and biochemistry. It is imperative that you keep him alive until the morning. My colleagues will come then, and take care of him.//*

He waited for an answer, but the only response was the gentle tug of suckers against his arms.

The planet Orelia was the only satellite of a distant star at the very edge of Federation territory. Little was known of its history. Millennia ago, it seemed that there had been a thriving humanoid population on this most pleasant of worlds.

The people had been fortunate in having such a beautiful home, rich in vegetation and mineral deposits. They had flourished for generations, and had constructed many buildings, including the metallic domes. However, like many other races they had also succeeded in destroying themselves, and after their passing nothing lived for many centuries.

The plant life, being the hardiest, had been the first to regenerate. The radiation in the atmosphere mutated the plant cells, and produced a limited intelligence. Hampered by the lack of movement, the newly-emerging life forms had been forced to develop a sophisticated planet-wide telepathy that bound them together.

Over many, many generations some of the plants had achieved movement, and a sophisticated knowledge of biochemistry. The planet now thrived peacefully, all the life forms being mindful of one another's needs. The Seeana, the healing plants, assisted if any of the life forms needed medical aid.

Over the years the pooled telepathic mind reached out to the heavens and registered the presence of other beings. Afraid that their peaceful world would be endangered, and aware that sensor probes had scanned their home, they had decided to project a telepathic screen around Orelia suggesting an unpleasant environment and so dissuading settlers. This had been sufficient to prevent further contact, until now. They had been powerless to prevent the Captain's shuttlecraft from crashing, and they had allowed Spock to land unharmed because they recognised him from their link with Kirk.

All of this Spock learned as the Seeana took from his mind the knowledge they needed. Previously they had been working in a vacuum - they did not even know the basics such as blood composition and pressure, heart and respiration rates. Now, armed with that knowledge, they could make finer adjustments to their patient's care. They were not chemically equipped to treat this unknown being completely, but at least now they could do more than just maintain the life force, and begin to promote self healing.

Spock had been prepared for a deep meld, but was still surprised by the Seeana's mental ability. He knew that if they had not controlled the joining, he would have found it difficult to maintain his own identity.

He was also unprepared for the echoes of Kirk's pain that he felt through the link, and from which the plants were protecting him. He had not fully realised just how serious the injuries were, and was deeply grateful that the Seeana had chosen to take Kirk's pain into themselves to control it.

Eventually, sensing Spock's distress, the plants prepared to withdraw. *//Do not be afraid. He will be aware of your love and care, and it will help him. As long as your colleagues come soon, he will live.//*

And Spock was again alone.

The hours passed. The Seeana made no further attempt to communicate. Spock knew that they were concentrating all their energies on keeping Kirk alive.

Through all of this the Captain hadn't moved, had not once shown any sign of awareness. His ragged breathing filled the silence, and Spock knew that Kirk was literally fighting for his life.

Spock sat on the corner of the metal slab and waited through the long hours of darkness. He refused to consider the implications of the Seeana's final statement to him. His concern increased with the passing of time, and unknown to himself each hour he sat chipped away a little more of the wall that made up his self-imposed Vulcan prison of non-emotion.

The communicator signal pierced the silence in the dome, startling Spock, even though he had tried to raise the ship a dozen times in the last hour. He was grateful that there was no-one there to witness his profound relief. He also wasted no time on preliminaries.

"Spock to Enterprise. This is a medical emergency. Dr. McCoy, you will need to beam down at once with full life support systems. And Doctor - please do not be alarmed by what you find here."

The warning proved necessary. McCoy was outraged at the sight that met him as he materialised with his staff. Only the presence of the Vulcan, standing calmly awaiting their arrival, made him realise that there was more to this than met the eye.

As briefly as possible Spock explained the situation. McCoy was disbelieving.

"But you've at least given him a broad spectrum antibiotic, or a painkiller from the emergency kit?"

Wearily, Spock shook his head. "I dared not. There was no way of knowing for sure what chemical the Seeana were using, and I could not take the risk of there being an adverse interaction. Please, Doctor, I suggest you hook up life support, and the plants will then withdraw."

McCoy looked sharply at the Vulcan. Spock's voice was strained, and he looked incredibly tired; the Doctor sensed that there was much the Vulcan was not telling him. Kirk, however, had

to be the first priority. McCoy moved with his team to help the Captain, and within minutes the transporter had taken them back to the Enterprise. Spock was left to follow on alone with his memories.

The Enterprise once more hung in orbit around the Starbase.

Three days had passed. For those on the bridge of the Enterprise they had been three days of frantic activity.

Starfleet Command had been notified of the findings on Orelia, and considered the discovery of a potentially friendly planet so close to Klingon territory of immense importance. Teams of negotiators trained in telepathic communication had been despatched immediately to the Base. It was hoped that the intelligent plant life could be persuaded to affiliate with the Federation, and allow a small piece of land on which to build a Federation outpost. In return the Federation would guarantee protection against Klingon raiders, who would no doubt have little respect for the indigenous life forms. Although biochemically the plants were far advanced, mechanically they were obviously in no position to defend themselves.

McCoy was particularly pleased with the developments. On first getting Kirk to sickbay he had been momentarily overcome with despair, as he did not think that even the Enterprise's medical facilities would be enough to save the Captain. Kirk had been accurate in assessing the severity of his own injuries.

On closer examination, however, McCoy had been overawed by the amount of self healing that the plants had induced. Their knowledge of cell biochemistry was obviously far in advance of the Federation. The Doctor had not yet suggested it, but he hoped to persuade the negotiating teams to press for at least a small research station and hospital on the planet.

Once back in sickbay Kirk made rapid progress, and McCoy expected him to regain consciousness soon. The Doctor noted with growing annoyance that although Kirk often called for Spock in his delirium, the Vulcan never once came to sickbay. Pressure of work was not a sufficient excuse; all the bridge crew were equally busy finalising repairs and preparing for the negotiators' arrival, but each of them had found time to come and visit their Captain.

Finally, on the fourth day, Kirk came round. McCoy, greatly relieved, came to sit with his friend. Finding himself in sickbay, Kirk was filled with confusion. His last memory was of the dome, with the plants approaching, and Spock... How was it possible to survive that which he had known he could not survive?

Then terror came flooding back as he remembered Sam, and Gary; reaching out he grabbed the Doctor's arm. "Bones, am I mad?"

Gently McCoy disengaged the Captain's hand. "Jim, believe me when I say that you're as sane as I am. There's a reason for everything that's happened, and I'll tell you everything I know as soon as you're stronger. Now you must rest."

Kirk's eyes searched the sickbay. He had expected, after the Vulcan had melded with him on the planet, that Spock would be there. "Where's Spock? I had thought..."

McCoy interrupted him, lying skilfully. "He's busy on the bridge talking to Starfleet Command. He would have been here if he could." Crossing to the intercom he pressed a switch. "Mr. Spock, the Captain's awake and would like to see you."

There was a long silence, then, "I'll be right down."

McCoy hoped fervently that Kirk hadn't noticed the hesitation in the reply.

It could not be put off any longer. Spock had been dreading the summons ever since he'd beamed back onto the Enterprise. He had immersed himself in work, and indeed there was a lot to be done. Numerous messages had been sent via the Base to Starfleet Command, and Spock himself had returned once to Orelia to ask the Seeana if they would act as negotiators in talks with the Federation. The plant life, realising that they could no longer stay isolated, and very aware of their vulnerability, had agreed to the talks.

Spock had stayed on the bridge under the pretext of work for most of the last three days. He knew the other bridge crew members were disapproving of his not having been to sickbay. Spock could not admit to himself that he was afraid to go. Was it really possible that Kirk would know and remember the part Spock had played in his recovery? The mind-voices of the Seeana reverberated over and over again in his thoughts.

*//He will be aware of your love and care. He will be aware of...//*

No! Spock refused to allow the possibility. How was it feasible that they could know him better than he knew himself? There had obviously been a misunderstanding. The plants had never encountered a Vulcan mind before, and had misinterpreted logical concern for... the other.

After three days Spock had succeeded in rationalising the incident. The decision he had made before the Captain's disappearance, to strengthen his emotional non-involvement, would have to stand. When the intercom summoned him he was as ready as he would ever be.

Spock made his way to sickbay and was gratified to find his mind logical and calm. He was pleased that the Captain was recovering. Doubtless there would be many matters to discuss over the next few days. There was no reason to suppose that there would be any problems between them.

*//He will be aware of your...//*

No! He would not allow that thought to surface again. The Captain had offered friendship misguidedly, not realising that he, as a Vulcan, could not accept it. Spock would not be impolite, but he would be logical and firm. Eventually - given enough time - he hoped that he could mould their relationship into something resembling that which he had had with Captain Pike.

Finding himself outside the sickbay door, Spock went in quickly before his resolve could weaken.

Kirk was sitting propped up in one of the sickbay beds,

attended by a hovering McCoy. The Captain looked pale and tired, and some of the memories of the hours he had spent in the dome watching this Human fight for life came flooding back into the Vulcan's mind.

"Spock!" Kirk's voice was strained, but the warmth and affection in his eyes pierced through and demolished the Vulcan's already fragile defences.

Spock knew in that instant that he had lost. He wanted above all else to step forward, to say the man's name and return the smile. Instead, from somewhere within him the Vulcan took control, and in a last desperate attempt to save the situation he found himself taking a step backwards, his eyes hard.

"Captain, I am pleased to see you looking so well. There are many things we must discuss when you are better."

He was horrified himself at the indifference in his voice. Even as he said the words he knew a deep regret, and wished dearly that he could retract them.

The confusion and hurt in Kirk's eyes were evident. The man before him bore no resemblance to the man he had thought his friend. How was it possible that the Vulcan he had known on the planet could have turned so much against him? Kirk too had his pride, and his eyes grew quickly as hard as the Vulcan's, although the Doctor could see the effort it cost him.

"Of course, Mr. Spock. We'll talk later."

McCoy stared at them both in amazement. He moved to say something, but could think of nothing that would soften the brittle atmosphere.

The Vulcan, overwhelmed with feelings he could not understand, let alone control, nodded curtly and strode out of the sickbay.

Over the next few days the Captain beamed down several times to the Starbase for debriefing sessions and extensive physical and mental tests. Although the authorities accepted now that he had been an unwilling victim of the traders' plan, they wanted to be sure that no hidden conditioning remained. The first couple of times McCoy went with him, anxious to provide moral support, but after that he let Kirk go alone, sensing that the Captain needed time by himself to come to terms with all that had happened to him.

McCoy was worried by Kirk's reaction when told of the Seeana. The Doctor knew it must be difficult to accept that plants had saved one's life, but there was something more. It seemed that with the knowledge some spark had died inside Kirk, and he had become quiet and withdrawn.

McCoy fretted and worried about the situation. After the incredible scene with Spock in sickbay, and now Kirk's quiet withdrawal, he sensed that there were things going on beneath the surface of which he knew nothing.

Finally, one evening when Kirk was on the Base, the Doctor went to the Captain's rooms and used his medical override to enter. He felt no qualms about doing so; in his opinion the situation

warranted drastic action.

Having taken out the Captain's personal log recorded over the last few days, he sat back to listen to the tape. When it had finished he sat alone in the darkness, thinking late into the night.

The Starbase doctors pronounced the Captain mentally sound, and physically well if not yet completely fit. There was no reason why he should not resume command immediately.

At that things seemed to return to normal to all outward appearances. It was decided that the Starbase could deal with the Orelia negotiations, and the Enterprise was freed to resume its mission of exploration.

Kirk took up light duties, and the Vulcan First Officer continued with his lengthy shifts. Their time on the bridge rarely seemed to coincide, and McCoy never did find out which one of them had managed to engineer the situation.

But Kirk was becoming more and more withdrawn, and his mood was inevitably affecting the rest of the crew. Finally McCoy managed to corner the Captain alone in his cabin.

"What's the matter with you, Jim? You've been moping around this ship like..."

"Bones! Bones, how do I know that my mind is my own?" Kirk's voice was low and desperate.

At last McCoy understood what was troubling his friend, and sought to reassure him. "Of course your mind's all right! What are you thinking about? They ran just about every check there is on that Base. Do you think Starfleet Command would put you back in command of a spaceship if they had any doubts?"

Kirk turned to face him, and no longer made any attempt to disguise the naked fear in his eyes. "But I don't know, Bones. Suppose... those men... planted some trigger in my mind that can't be detected. The Federation doesn't know everything about mind control. Suppose, maybe in five or six years time even, someone activates that trigger and again I'm under suspicion. I can't remain in command of 400 lives knowing that some day I might put them all at risk. Can't you see that I'll never, ever, be sure?"

"Jim!" McCoy was dismayed by his friend's distress. He knew the fear to be irrational, but could understand how it came about. Yet there was nothing he could think of to do that would help. At least, there was nothing he could do... "Jim, let me ask Spock..."

"No!" Kirk's reply was vehement. He had seriously misjudged the Vulcan's feeling before, and was not going to go through that same embarrassment again. "I want nothing from Spock."

"You're as stubborn as he is. Why won't you let him help you? With a meld he could dispel in minutes a fear that could ruin your entire career."

Kirk's voice was bitter. "I won't be melded with out of charity. And anyway, he wouldn't come if you asked him."



Finally, then, McCoy understood what he had to do. "But if he *did* come, would you see him?"

Kirk was silent. He wanted desperately to be free of uncertainty, but he couldn't bring himself to accept any help from a Vulcan stranger he no longer felt he knew or liked.

McCoy, taking the silence as an affirmative, hurriedly left the room and went straight to Spock's quarters. The Doctor hadn't seen much of the Vulcan over the last few days. He had met him occasionally on the bridge, as had the Captain. There, routine went on as usual. All three of them were far too professional to let personal feelings get in the way of the running and safety of the Enterprise.

Off duty, McCoy had made no attempt to seek out the Vulcan, a part of him still blaming Spock for Kirk's current unhappiness. The scene in sickbay still rankled, and he would not soon forget the hurt in Kirk's eyes. Unfortunately, it now seemed that Spock could help Kirk in a way that he, McCoy, could not. That being the case, it was up to him to see that Kirk got the help he needed.

Outside the door the Doctor paused. He knew Spock would not want to see him, but he was determined to try. Receiving no answer to several requests for entry he used his override and stepped quickly through the door. By the time it closed behind him the Vulcan had risen to his feet, outraged, from behind the desk where he had been sitting.

"How dare you invade my privacy without permission!"

McCoy had never seen the Vulcan other than controlled, and was suddenly very aware of Spock's superior physical strength. But he stood his ground. "I need to talk to you about the Captain."

"If you do not leave immediately I will call Security and have you forcibly removed."

"Go ahead. Only think how it would look on the records that the First Officer was afraid to talk to his Doctor."

They stared at each other defiantly across the room, each refusing to give ground. Suddenly it was as if the fight drained out of the Vulcan. He sat down on the chair, and McCoy could see that his hands were shaking. Only now did the Doctor notice how drawn the Vulcan had become, and understood then that Kirk was not the only one suffering. McCoy's voice softened.

"Spock, you'll have to talk to someone sooner or later, or you'll break down. Isn't it... logical... to talk to me?"

Spock did not look up, but he did not refute the statement either. Relieved at overcoming this first hurdle, the Doctor sat down opposite the Vulcan and considered carefully what to say.

"Spock, I need you to attempt the Vulcan mind meld with Jim. All the scans they did at the Starbase hospital were completely normal, but a part of him remains afraid that his mind has been interfered with in some way. Unless we find some way to convince him that no hidden conditioning remains, he will continue to doubt his own sanity, and eventually might be forced to abandon his command."

McCoy was aware of the stiffening in the Vulcan's posture. Spock had folded his hands in his lap, and continued to stare at them fixedly, unwilling to face the Doctor directly. When he spoke his voice was inflexible.

"I regret, Doctor, that will not be possible."

"Why? Is it because you can't, or you won't?" McCoy was angry, and he made no attempt to conceal it.

"Because I cannot. The dangers would be too great. There might be permanent damage, and..."

"Poppycock!" McCoy knew that he was raising his voice, and made a conscious effort to control it. "I'm sorry, Spock, but that argument has no basis in fact. I know that the first time you attempted such a contact with Van Gelder you were afraid there might be permanent changes to the blood vessels, but all the tests we ran afterwards showed that to be a false assumption. There was no damage suffered by the Doctor, and he's now completely healed and leading a normal life. If you could do it for a stranger, why not for someone who is much closer to you?"

There! The words were out before McCoy could retract them. Then he decided it was probably for the best that they had been said. Did Spock think him so blind that he couldn't see where the problem actually lay?

There was a long silence. The Vulcan continued to stare at his hands, but in his mind his thoughts would not be so easily quieted. Did McCoy really think he hadn't been in this situation before? On first joining Starfleet, how many times had he tried to mix with others, only to be turned away by ridicule and prejudice? At least, the way things were, he could pretend that there had been some understanding between Kirk and himself. In the intimacy of a meld there could be no pretence, no going back. How would it be if Kirk, too, carried that same dislike deep within him?

McCoy was encouraged by the lengthy silence. At least the Vulcan had not resumed his commands that the Doctor leave the room. Finally McCoy leaned forward.

"Spock, do you know what I was doing the last night Jim was on the Base?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I was listening to Jim's personal log, recorded shortly after he had regained consciousness on the Enterprise."

Now at last he received a reaction. The Vulcan's head snapped up, and his eyes were hard.

"That is highly unethical. The Captain's personal log is his own private record. You could be reported, or even arrested, for such an infringement of regulations." Even as he said the words Spock remembered a time - not so long ago - when he had also looked through Kirk's personal things without permission.

McCoy was speaking. "Never mind that now. I listened because as Medical Officer I thought it might help me to understand what was going on between the two of you. I want you to know what was on it. Spock, do you know what happened to Jim down on that planet?"

"Of course I do. I have read the official report, and we both know the injuries the Captain sustained..."

McCoy cut him off. "I mean, do you know what happened to him mentally? After the crash he was totally confused and in great pain. Memories of his family had been tampered with, he feared for his sanity and his life, and he was totally alone. When he first saw the Seeana plants, he didn't react in the way he'd been trained to. Normally he would have coped rationally with an alien life form. Because of the mental and physical state he was in, however, he reacted with blind terror and would not let them approach him. They in their turn were confused because they had no experience of non-telepathic beings. They could see from his mind that he was in pain and physically wounded; they wanted to help him, but could find no way to contact him and make him understand, so they took from his mind the image of someone in his thoughts and masked themselves with that illusion, thinking that he would accept their help in that way. They were not to know that the image they chose was Gary's.

"When Jim saw his dead friend approaching him, for a moment he almost did lose his grip on reality, and fled deeper into the woods, reopening many of his wounds in doing so. By the time the plants found him again, drawn by the mental emanations of fear and pain, he had collapsed in the dome in which you found him.

"The Seeana were both confused by his reaction and aware that the life force of this strange creature was ebbing, and that soon it would die. They knew they would only have one more chance to give the needed help, and that they would have to do so quickly if they were to do any good.

"This time they probed his thoughts more deeply and with more care before assuming another illusion. When Jim opened his eyes he thought it was you, Spock, in the dome there with him. As they approached they offered to relieve his pain, and he, thinking that it was you and expecting some kind of Vulcan mind touch, accepted their help. The rest you know.

"That is why Jim was so confused and hurt by your attitude in sickbay. It was a genuine misunderstanding. You were not to know what had happened, and he, at that stage, did not know that in reality it was the plants that had kept him alive."

Spock was silent, trying to absorb this new information. Strangely, what he felt most was annoyance and worry that Kirk would be so foolish as to allow an alien being to enter his mind so casually.

From somewhere, a thought came unbidden. *He did not allow an alien being to meld with him, he allowed ME.* Spock could not deny that warmth that spread through him at that knowledge. Finally he looked up and met McCoy's eyes.

"Why did you not tell me this sooner? Why wait all these days to help him?"

This time it was McCoy who looked down, and his voice was quiet. "Spock, unfortunately I'm only Human. You think I'm telling you this to show you that Jim is not afraid of the meld, but that's not the point of the story.

"When the plants chose their second illusion, they knew that they could not afford a second mistake. They searched, and took from Jim's mind the image of the one person they could be absolutely sure he would not reject. It that meant that the person was you, it also meant that it wasn't me.

"At first I was hurt by that knowledge. I've known Jim for years, and care about him deeply, and I know he respects and cares for me. I offer him the help and advice that his father never had the time to give him. Because of this, and because I am a Doctor, it seemed to me that I would have been the more logical choice. I too missed the fact that this was not a logical situation.

"Spock, at the time he thought he was dying, the person Jim most wanted with him was you. Jim desperately needs someone with whom he can be on equal terms, a friend who will complement him, and match him on grounds of intellect and ability. Gary was almost that friend, but for all the years they knew each other, their friendship never developed to the point that I've seen your friendship with Jim reach in just a few short weeks.

"I admit now that I was initially jealous of your obvious compatibility. Now that I've thought about it, I've accepted that to be a childish attitude, like young children at school who want to own their special friends and keep them exclusively for themselves.

"Jim doesn't feel less for me because of what he feels for you. We both care for Jim, and the three of us could work well together. And the fact is, at the moment you can help him and I can't.

"But Spock, if you don't allow yourself to accept the truth of what I'm saying, if you continue to push Jim away, one day you'll succeed. He's as proud and stubborn as you are, and he's not going to keep on offering his friendship forever."

McCoy stopped then, fearing that he had said too much. The minutes passed slowly, and the Doctor wondered if he had only made the situation worse.

Finally, though, the Vulcan spoke, so quietly that McCoy could barely hear the words.

"Doctor, I say this not to gain your sympathy, but perhaps to gain your understanding. Friendship, as you Humans see it, is a thing of which I have no knowledge. How am I to know how to deal with such a situation?"

Finally, then, McCoy relaxed and smiled. "Spock, take some advice. Let the future take care of itself. We Humans deal with friendship as we do with life, one step at a time. Go to Jim. Help him to understand and come to terms with what has happened. If you both try enough, tomorrow will take care of itself. And please, Spock, don't worry that I'll tell Jim or anyone else about this conversation. It'll remain between the two of us. Think about it for a while if you want to, only don't wait too long."

McCoy got up then and went to the doorway, sensing that Spock needed to be left alone. He went, knowing that he had done all he could, and praying it would be enough.

For a long time Spock sat unmoving in his chair. He would never admit it to McCoy, but he was grateful that the Doctor had come. Their conversation had brought to a head matters that the Vulcan had spent many troubled hours thinking about.

Spock accepted finally that his old life on the Enterprise was

finished. The new Captain would not allow him to hide any more in an emotional vacuum. Now a decision as to his future could no longer be avoided, and Spock knew that he stood at the crossroads of his life. He could either leave the Enterprise and continue his old path of Vulcan isolation on some other ship, or - he could accept that there might be an alternative way.

Remembering his own outburst on the Base when the Commander had put forward the idea of a transfer, Spock reflected wryly that it would seem that at some time during the last few weeks his subconscious had already made the commitment for him. He was betraying both sides of his heritage, and causing the Captain and himself unnecessary pain, by continually refusing to acknowledge consciously the existence of that commitment.

A great peace settled on Spock with that realisation. There was, when you faced it, nothing to be afraid of. He knew the Captain well enough to know that no sudden change would be expected of him. All that was required was an open mind, a willingness to accept that personal growth and change were not only possible but desirable. It was the law of nature that nothing could survive without change, and it had been illogical to assume that he was in some way immune to that law.

All that remained, therefore, was to put his new decision into action. McCoy had effectively settled any doubts Spock had had as to Kirk's feelings in the situation. Now the Captain needed his help and he, as a Vulcan, would give it.

Spock stood then and left the room to head for the Captain's quarters. Outside Kirk's door he paused, knowing that this time there could be no mistakes and no going back. He had to go in with all his defences down, for he knew the Captain would be aware of any resistance. Pressing the switch to request entry, he stepped through immediately the door slid open.

With no mental shields he was aware at once of the other man's feelings, and realised with a pang that he was not the only one suffering from fear of rejection and uncertainty.

Feeling as though he had come to the end of a long journey, Spock finally found the necessary courage to take that first step forward. He allowed himself to smile, and said tentatively, "Jim?"

Kirk looked up in amazement. He had never really believed that the Vulcan would come. Part of him wanted to lash out verbally at Spock, to hurt him as he himself had been hurt.

But there was something different.

A vulnerability.

Kirk met the Vulcan's eyes then, and saw the tremendous effort it had cost Spock to come here. The least he could do was meet him half-way. Leaning back, he swallowed the bitterness and smiled a little in response.

"Spock. Come in."

He held his breath, wondering if he should say anything more to assure the Vulcan that there need not be any further animosity between them, but he need not have worried.

It was enough.

#### AFTERWORD

Much later that evening Spock knelt in the semi-darkness before the flickering Vulcan flames and turned his mind inwards. He was not quite sure what it was he was looking for, yet was strangely unsurprised when he found it almost immediately.

The link that had formed that day during his meld with the Captain stretched away into the darkness, and Spock was filled with a sense of awe that it should have formed with this man.

No longer just the Captain, James T. Kirk.

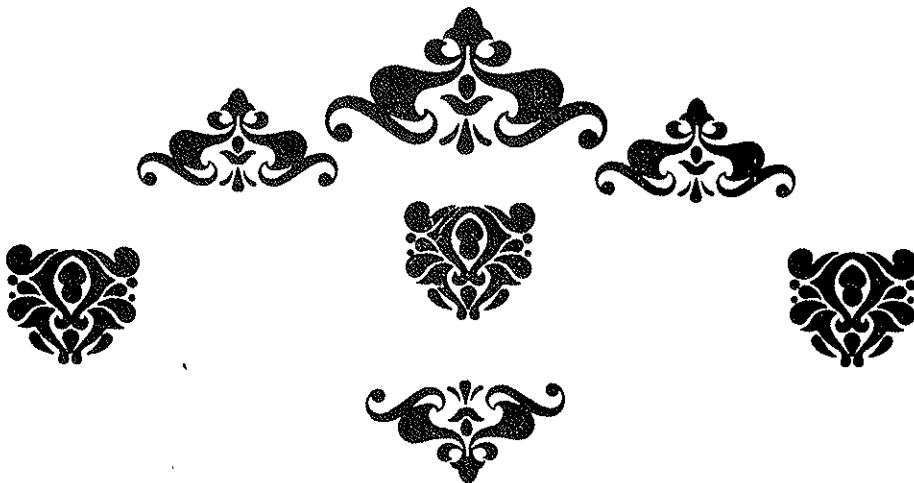
Now also Jim, his friend.

Unbidden, his mind reached for a Vulcan word. T'hy'la. More than friend. A commitment not easily forged and not to be broken.

His mind ranged back over the weeks, tracing the gradual acknowledgement of each other, surprised now at the mutual reluctance to recognise the signs.

Spock foresaw that although fragile and newly formed, the bond would only strengthen and grow in the years ahead. With a sense of premonition he knew that it would sometimes prove to be a double-edged sword, bringing anxiety and sorrow as well as happiness. Yet he was not saddened by the knowledge. With a growing sense of wonder he realised that for the first time in his life he was no longer truly alone, and that Jim, too, would no longer have to bear alone the aching burden of responsibility that Spock had first sensed in their joining of minds.

The future would have to take care of itself. He could not hope to anticipate all the problems of the years ahead. For now, safe in the privacy of his cabin, Spock knew he had finally come home, and was at peace.



# SNAKES! UGH!

by

Joyce Devlin

It shouldn't happen to a doctor. Whoever said that ought to be shot. It does - frequently - to this one. You'd think that being Chief Medical Officer on a ship as important as the USS Enterprise would count for something, but no.

Well, take the time when I found sickbay crawling with slimy snakes... Okay, snakes aren't slimy, but they are slithery.

It was just after we'd all come back from Koodo. We'd been on shore leave, and for once nothing had happened. Nothing, that is, except that our dear Captain hadn't been seen or heard from in three days. He'd beamed back aboard early without telling anyone, and it wasn't until after I found those slithery slimy things in sickbay that the whole story came out. And believe you me, I was hopping mad.

I'd gone into sickbay as usual at the beginning of my shift, and found my Chief Nurse and several others standing on the diagnostic beds screaming.

"What the hell...?" I started, and stopped dead just in time to see the first snake disappear into the ship's ventilation system, closely followed by a second. "I'm seeing things," I said.

"No you're not, Doctor." Chapel climbed back to the floor.

"Snakes?"

"Snakes."

"Sickbay to bridge!" I yelled into the intercom; somebody was going to be in for the high jump.

"Bridge. Kirk here."

"Captain, you have two snakes loose in the ventilation system," I reported.

There was silence for a moment, then Jim's reply was almost inaudible.

"Oh, shit. On my way. Kirk out."

If I'd seen his face I'd have known who the culprit was sooner than I did; but I didn't, and by the time he arrived I had sickbay upside down and a cleaning detail in.

"Snakes, Bones? What do they look like?"

It had taken him longer to arrive than it would normally have done, but at the time I was too busy to bother.

"What do snakes look like? Snakes are snakes to me - bloody slimy things crawling all over my sickbay, they were," I grumbled.

"Bones..."

"I saw them disappearing into the vent over there."

"Oh, hell!" Jim responded.

"When I get my hands on whoever brought them aboard I'll kick him or her up the backside before I recommend they be court-martialled for bringing dangerous animals onto the ship without permission," I flared.

It was then that he dropped the bombshell and told me. "You'd better kick me, then, Bones," he said as he shifted his feet uncomfortably, looking very sheepish.

"YOU?"

"That's right. I bought two Koodo garter snakes for Peter's birthday. They've gone." He wasn't telling me all of it, but I was soon to find out.

"Koodo garter snakes. Jim, I don't believe it. You..."

"They aren't dangerous, Bones," he said in self-defence.

"No, but... Out with it, Mister. There's more, if I know you. What aren't you telling me, Jim? Out with it!" I flared as I backed him into a corner.

"Er... They like to breed."

"They *what*?"

"In heat..."

"I don't believe it!" I snapped. "I just don't believe what I'm hearing. Jim, have you lost all your marbles?"

"No, but we've got to get them back."

"We've got to ge them back?"

"All right, I've got to get them back. Which way did they go? I'll have to go after them."

Spock chose that moment to come into sickbay. I bet his curiosity could be contained no longer.

"Were you in on this, too?" I asked.

"In on what, Doctor?"

"Him bringing snakes aboard."

"No. Captain?"

"Koodo garter snakes. Quite harmless, Spock," Jim said in self defence.

"Provided they do not have red streaks underneath."



"What?"

"They would then be Koodo adders; very similar to the garter snakes, but poisonous."

At that moment the two snakes slithered back out of the vent into sickbay. All three of us turned when one of my nurses screamed and dropped the tray she was carrying.

"I'll get them. Spock, there's a tank in my quarters," Jim said.

"I'll get it," I offered. I wasn't about to stay in sickbay while those two hunted for snakes. God, I hate them, and the thought of them crawling about my sickbay was enough to set my skin crawling. UGH!

I was in Jim's cabin, and just about to lift the tank, when the intercom sounded.

"Dr. McCoy to sickbay. The Captain's been bitten by one of the snakes," Chris Chapel said.

"On my way."

My mind was racing. If Jim had been bitten by a garter snake, there was no emergency, but if they turned out to be Koodo adders, god help us. I ran out of the cabin, tank under my arm, and back to sickbay.

The sight that greeted me was total chaos. Jim was lying on one of the diagnostic beds. Spock was hovering over him, holding two lifeless snakes by the throat; their undersides clearly showed red streaks.

*Oh god, adders, not the harmless garter snakes he thought he'd bought!*

I dropped the tank and grabbed the hypo Chris held out to me. M'Benga was already busy trying to revive Jim. I pressed the hypo home, and Jim's body relaxed as the antidote took effect. Then he convulsed, and threw up all over my sickbay floor, almost rolling off the bed in the process.

Once the retching subsided he opened his eyes, much to our relief.

"Oh god, I feel awful."

"And so you should. Garter snakes, indeed. They were bloody adders! Good job we keep a supply of all antidotes to hand, Jim, or you'd be dead by now." I wasn't at all pleased, and swung round on Spock.

"What exactly happened?" I demanded.

"The Captain bent to pick up one of the snakes when it coiled up and attacked. The Captain's arm was bitten. I am afraid I had to break the fangs to remove the snake." Spock dropped the bodies into the tank and replaced the lid as he spoke.

"You mean the fangs are still in his arm?"

"Yes."

I sprang into action, throwing orders about right, left and centre.

"Spock, get those things out of here. Chapel, set up the operating room. M'Benga, scrub up." I was already at Jim's bedside, rolling up his sleeve to examine the embedded fangs. His arm was already beginning to swell, and I prodded the area carefully.

"Bones, that hurts," the Captain complained.

"How far up?" I didn't like what I was seeing; the poison had spread almost up to his shoulder.

Koodo adders contain two different poisons; one attacks the nervous system, the other causes the body to swell to a dangerous degree. I had to work fast, or the Captain could explode before our eyes.

"Okay, ready," Chapel called.

That's all I needed. The bed was moved into the O.R., and I scrubbed.

It took us almost two hours to get the fangs out of Jim's arm, and as much of the poison as possible out of his system. It was touch and go for a few hours after the operation.

Spock had disposed of the snakes. Well, actually, I'd told him to get the bloody things off the ship any way he saw fit, and I meant it.

The Captain lay in a coma for four hours, and I never moved from his side. Spock hovered in and out of sickbay until he was able to hand command over to Scotty.

When Jim came out of the coma at last it was to find Spock and me at his bedside.

"He's coming out of it, Spock."

I motioned to the panel above the bed, but I spoke too soon. The readings went haywire.

"Jim." Spock spoke quietly.

"Jim!" I repeated. "Spock, he's slipping away from us. The anaesthetic reacted with the poison. Do something!"

Spock placed his forefinger and thumb on Jim's temple. I stood by and watched, just in case I had to break the meld quickly. Thank god, I didn't have to.

"Spock!" Jim gasped weakly, taking hold of the Vulcan's hand.

"Jim." Spock let his relief flood his face.

"Bones?"

"I'm here, Jim. How are you feeling?" I asked.

It wasn't often that Spock let anyone see his control slip. I didn't say anything; I was too relieved.

I kept the Captain in sickbay for four days - it was all I could stand. For days of having my ears chewed off as to when he could return to duty. Reluctantly, I let him return to his own quarters, but as I still needed to do a few more blood tests he remained off duty.

It was during one of the tests that I got a good chance to speak to him.

"How much longer are you going to keep me cooped up in my quarters?" he asked for the tenth time in ten minutes.

"Jim," I said finally as I read the test result on my scanner, "stop moaning and be grateful that Spock was there and knew exactly what to do. And another thing," I continued before he could reply, "what on earth possessed you to break your own rules? You must have had a reason for making them in the first place."

"Tribbles," Jim muttered as he held out his arm for dressing.

"Well, I'd sooner have two tribbles to contend with than two adders - Koodo adders at that. Good grief, Jim, be thankful you're alive, and don't go breaking your own rules. For crying out loud, if that had been me you'd have gone through the roof, saying that being CMO I should have known better. Well, Jim, as Captain, you should have known better." I finished dressing his arm.

"Bones, stop nagging. You've made your point. I made a mistake, and I'm paying for it."

I let my surprise show. "Captain, are you feeling yourself? I mean, admitting you were in error. Jim, that's not like you."

"I've learned a valuable lesson, Bones."

"What's that?"

"Stick to the rules, whether I made them or not."

"Glad to hear it. Maybe - just maybe - we'll all be able to relax a bit."

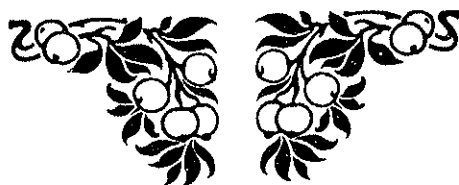
Who was I trying to kid? Relax, with Jim and Spock around? Never! If it wasn't one it was the other I had in sickbay. One of these days I'm not going to be able to patch them up. I nearly lost Jim that time, and he knew it. Maybe - just maybe - he would behave himself for a time, and give my poor ears a chance to recover from all his moaning.

Snakes. Ugh! Just the thought still makes my skin crawl. Well, time will tell if Jim is going to regain the full use of his arm. I'd done all I could, but the poison has damaged the nerves, so I'll have to repair the damage once his blood is back to normal. Another day of antitoxin injections should see it clear, then I can get down to the business of a permanent repair. There was nothing more I could have done at the time; Jim was just too critical for me

to do more than remove the fangs.

Like I said before, why does it always have to happen to me? After all, I'm just a normal country doctor... with one small difference. I'm also Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, and she keeps me busy, as do Jim and Spock.

Do I nag? I don't - do I?



## PAUSE

He sat frozen at his post, awaiting the unfathomable, as if certain. Spock remained unmoved, trying to disentangle himself from a past of which he was jealous, despite its being his own, Torn aside from his Captain by the passing of mere time.

They came and went, leaving him untouched, he vaguely aware of McCoy's protective presence, kitten-like in his demands of privacy for him. Yet he remained stationary, until even Bones, no longer questioning the whys, accepting in the trust that was his alone, allowed Spock at least time.

Until Spock, long hours later, stirred with purpose, aware of the Human crew's hope, waiting for the apprentice to pull the rabbit from the metaphoric hat.

And aware of Human eyes upon him Spock continued, certain that it was with them a case of *when*, not *if*.

Returned. Over-excitement from the crew. Jim's own relief. Ten-fold emotions. His task completed, his Captain now safe, he retired softly away...

Susan P. Keighley



# THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT

by

A. C. James

Dr. Leonard McCoy collapsed wearily into the chair in his office. What a day! What a week! He'd barely had a wink of sleep since the Enterprise arrived at the stricken planet Pluta.

The explosion which had ripped through the mines had caused considerable damage, and far too many casualties. Mr. Spock had soon got to the root of the problem - an error in the computer's programme.

Typical! All those lives lost, all those miners maimed for life, and all because some bright spark decided that it would be a good idea to let a computer have absolute control of the entire mining project.

There were too many of the damn machines around for his liking; whatever had happened to good old *man* power? If only people relied a little less on computers and a little more on their own instincts... If only... He sighed - what was the use of thinking like that? Computers were definitely here to stay, and that was that.

McCoy's thoughts returned to the events of the past week. He and his medical team were all exhausted, but he was proud of them. No-one could ask for a better team of people. And now the Enterprise was ready to leave; the inhabitants would be left to cope as best they could; and in a day or so, after a good rest, he and his team would be ready again to deal with the next sick or injured person fate sent them.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, sighing deeply. How wonderful it would be to be able to turn his back on it all for a while, and have a nice long holiday on a quiet, peaceful planet.

"Tired, Bones?"

The voice of his Captain broke into his reverie. McCoy didn't get up - he and Kirk were old friends; opening one eye he grunted his reply.

"Hmmm..." continued Kirk. "How would you like a nice, pleasant break on a quiet, peaceful planet?"

McCoy opened his other eye and sat up with a surprised look on his tired face. "Since when did you take up mind reading? I was just thinking about how nice it would be to get away for a while as you came in."

"Well, how about it?" asked Kirk.

"Are you serious?"

Kirk nodded.

"Mmm. Just point me in the right direction and I'll be gone before you can turn around," said the Doctor, grinning widely.

"Ummm... there's a catch," said Kirk, tugging his ear anxiously.

McCoy's smile faded.

"It's not a very *big* catch," Kirk continued. "Not really."

"Uh-oh! I thought it was too good to be true. So, what's the catch? Come on, Jim, spit it out. What's the fly in the ointment?"

"Well, you'll... umm... have a... companion," mumbled Kirk.

McCoy started to grin again. "That doesn't sound too bad. Is she pretty?" he asked hopefully.

"Well," Kirk hedged, "not exactly pretty, although a lot of women think he's quite handsome."

McCoy's face dropped. "He!" he said miserably.

Kirk continued quickly, as if loath to reveal the identity of the companion. "There will be a little bit of work involved - collecting samples of plants, and so forth. Your companion's job will be more... scientific."

Kirk waited quietly for the Doctor's reaction. Had he realised yet who his companion was to be? If he had there would have been the usual onslaught of excuses and arguments as to why someone else should go. He waited patiently, but strangely none were forthcoming.

Instead McCoy went on to ask, "That's all I have to do? Collect plant samples?"

"That's all, old friend. As soon as your work is done you can have the rest of the time to yourself. It shouldn't take you long to collect a few plants and such like."

"Hmmm," said McCoy thoughtfully. "What's the plan of action, then? And what will this 'companion' be doing?"

"Well," answered Kirk, "I've been ordered to transport a consignment of medical supplies from Starbase 9 to Pluta. My intention is to drop you off on the way to the Starbase, and pick you up on the way back. You'll probably be there for seven to eight days. Oh, and as I said, your companion's job will be of a... scientific nature."

"I see," said McCoy, nodding. Suddenly he stood up and began to pace the room. "Scientific," he said, frowning. "Scientific. Just who *is* this companion, anyway?"

Kirk looked slightly uncomfortable. "Ummm... didn't I say?"

"No you did not say, Captain. Oh! Oh, I know who it is! You're asking me to spend a week - a whole week - in that Vulcan's company, with no-one else to talk to, no sickbay to take refuge in. You are joking, I hope?"

"Don't panic, Bones," said Kirk, smiling weakly. "Ama-Zea is not entirely uninhabited. There are a few small villages here and there. I've spoken to the High Priestess, and you and Spock will be given accommodation in the largest village, Kaleeda. I'm sure you will both be made most welcome."

McCoy grunted again as he sat back down and sighed deeply, resting his chin on his cupped hands.

"Come on, Bones, it won't be that bad," said Kirk, sitting on the edge of the desk.

"Then why don't you go?" snapped the Doctor.

"You know I can't. Anyway, you're more qualified for the job," replied the Captain.

"Do I have a choice?" pouted the now quite miserable Doctor.

"No," answered Kirk apologetically. "Think of it as a challenge - a chance to get to know Spock better."

McCoy sighed yet again. "When do we go?"

"Oh, not for ages," replied Kirk as he headed for the door. "At least... three hours."

"Three hours!"

Kirk winked and disappeared through the door. As he walked along the corridor he smiled to himself. It would do them both good. He only wished he could disguise himself and witness the events of the week ahead - especially when they both realised that it was a planet run entirely by women. He chuckled to himself as he made his way to his First Officer's cabin.



## A VULCAN'S PRAYER



Give me my solitude, my peace, my time  
In which I am myself to find  
My space to think and time to sit  
Away from everything - to shrink  
My solitude to wait and while  
In my own relaxing style  
That most precious of gifts to me  
To be what I want to be  
With time to think and peace to sink  
Where solitude isn't only a wink  
And that gives me space to be  
That most unique of beings - me.

Maggie Symon

# TAKEN FOR GRANTED

by

Susan Keighley

Spock turned to see Kirk dashing towards him grinning happily at the thought of a library of real books on the planet.

"I've requested permission for us both," he exclaimed. "We've been granted a three-day membership - a great honour," he added.

"The Syton are very protective of their privacy," Spock warned. "How did you manage it?"

"I lent them my copy of 'Rebecca'," Kirk explained, cutting in. "They gathered that anyone owning such a treasure couldn't be all bad. You coming?" he asked sheepishly, aware that he hadn't asked the Vulcan as yet.

Kirk rose happily at dawn on the third day, refusing to think that this was his last day; yet today held the final treat, the 20th century Earth literature.

Spock sat at a crystal table quietly reading 'War and Peace', a small yet varied collection to his right. Glancing up, he saw Kirk, two books in hand, walking down the aisles, happy in his haze of good fortune.

It was many hours later that Spock, hearing Kirk moan, rose and closed his book gently. He followed the sound to its source and found in a side unit a shelf labelled with a plate stating 'DO NOT TOUCH'.

Kirk pointed to the space, and a small pile of grey dust on the immaculate floor. "It was an original Roman parchment. Well?" he implored.

"The punishment?" Spock mused. "Imprisonment? Death?"

"The scandal... Hell, Spock - a great opportunity, and I got carried away. Help me!" he pleaded. "For the Federation - they need the trust of these people."

Spock nodded, thought, then spoke. "Wait. I will return shortly," he promised, watching as Kirk hid the space on the shelf with his own body, his eyes on that grey dust.

He returned an hour later, parchment in hand. The dust pile had been removed, he noticed, and Kirk was standing casually by the shelf, a book in his hand. He moved to one side as Spock returned, watching as the Vulcan set his scroll in place.



Kirk sighed in relief. "I never gave you its name," he marvelled.

"I checked the index and the files for the contents," Spock explained. "The copy will stand most tests, and if it should be discovered at some future time it will be assumed that it was the fault of the original buyer," he added with amusement. "Why did you not obey the notice, Jim?" he continued, the Human in him needing to know.

"It was the notice that did it. It was such a little thing, and it didn't explain how frail it was, or I would have left it alone. I thought it was just a petty restriction." He shrugged, ashamed of his own childishness.

"We had best leave," Spock commented.

"We have four hours left," Kirk complained.

"A little self punishment, Captain?" Spock offered as he moved away, certain that his Captain would follow.

"Just think, the latest member of the Federation is due to a Vulcan con job," Kirk mused from his command chair, watching Chekov pull away from the system. "My ability..."

"For trouble?" Spock offered, falling silent as he saw McCoy approach.

"For trouble," Kirk agreed, grinning in self mockery. "However, in this case the solution was simple. The arrogance of the race works for us; it is naturally taken for granted that all accepted additions to their library are authentic, or so the librarian was boasting," he ended, aware that McCoy's attention was upon them.

"Who was boasting?" McCoy enquired.

"Oh, no-one," Kirk replied, watching as Spock returned to his post, his eyes alight with amusement - and, perhaps, shared humour at the con trick.

JIM! JIM!

She called. I heard her voice, sliding in time, echoing clearly down the years.

"Jim... Jim..." she named me still, despite achievements of age and rank.

I bolted upright, pulling a hot hand across sleep-fogged eyes, certain still of a distant voice. I turned to answer, meeting only a blue-toned wall, aware she was long gone.

The only sound that of running water, announcing Spock's late return, wordless, a sound of function. Not she... Yet somewhere, in the far distance, I heard her still.

Susan P. Keighley

# PSYCHOTHERAPY... OF A KIND

by

Nicole Comtet

Captain James T. Kirk stifled a yawn and shifted slightly in his command chair. He was feeling stiff, tired, and bored to death. He glanced at the bridge chronometer and made a face - another half hour to go before the end of his shift.

With a sigh he looked around, and sensed in the bridge crew the same feeling of weariness. No wonder: mapping survey was, at best, monotonous duty, but the last two weeks - during which the Enterprise had been engaged in star charting this distant sector of space - had proved wholly tedious. Except for the Science Officer, Mr. Spock, and his staff - who were doing the actual work - the rest of the crew had little to do beside routine activities.

Really, Kirk reflected bitterly, after the hectic events following an unfortunate landing on Beta XII, when the Enterprise crew had literally been at daggers drawn with Kang and his Klingons, manipulated by a mysterious being that fed on aggression, they would have been entitled to a well deserved R & R on the nearest Starbase; on the contrary, some Starfleet top brass had brought forth the bright idea that a quiet routine task like star mapping would be the very thing for the exhausted officers and crew. Well, he thought with a sigh, another two weeks to go, then they would speed off to Starbase 10, and there he would not accept another mission, whether Starfleet Command liked it or not. He hated to see his people so dispirited; they certainly deserved shore leave.

His thoughts were interrupted by the beep of his intercom. He switched it on. "Kirk here."

"Jim," came the voice of Dr. McCoy, "when you're through with your shift, would you come down and see me? I have to talk to you."

"Does it have to be in sickbay, or will the mess hall do? I'll be ready for a snack in about fifteen minutes. Why don't you come and join me, Bones?"

"Okay, Jim, I'll meet you there."

The intercom switched off, Kirk stood up and stretched, then he ambled around from one station to another, dropping a word here and there, until he reached the upper bridge section where the communications and science stations were located. Lt. Uhura looked up with a weary smile.

"Poor Uhura - it's pretty dull for you in this remote sector, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, Captain, but it's to be expected in this desert. I've come to the point of missing my hailing frequencies! Ah - here's my relief," she went on, seeing young Lt. Palmer step

out of the turbolift.

Kirk, turning to the science station, called, "Mr. Spock, time for a break."

The First Officer was so intent on communing with his computer that he did not answer.

Kirk repeated louder, "Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan's face rose abruptly, eerie-looking in the bluish gleam of the hooded screen. "Yes, Captain?"

"I was saying that it's lunch time. You can leave your charts for a while, can't you?"

"With your permission, Captain, I should complete these recordings first. May I join you in... 20.45 minutes?"

"Suit yourself, Mr. Spock, but don't overdo it. You've been working non-stop at this console for more than fourteen hours now. It's time to take a rest - and that's an order!"

"Acknowledged, Captain." Spock turned back to his console.

Kirk walked to the turbolift. "Coming, Lieutenant?" he called to Uhura. "Mr. Sulu, you take over, and I rely on you to make sure that Mr. Spock leaves in twenty minutes."

"Aye, Captain," Sulu replied with a grin, settling into the command seat while Kirk and Uhura disappeared from sight.

The mess hall, though rather crowded at this time of day, was unusually quiet - no laughter, no lively conversation. The officers, senior and junior alike, were eating silently, or exchanging a few words in low voices.

Kirk went straight to the food dispenser, programmed a hearty lunch (heroically dispensing with some rich, creamy trifle) and made his way to the corner where the doctor was sitting by himself, brooding over a beer.

McCoy looked up and raised his mug. "Cheers, Jim," he said gloomily.

"Cheers," replied the Captain, setting his tray on the table. "You're far from cheerful, McCoy; don't tell me even our CMO is down in the dumps."

"I am, Jim, like everyone on this ship," retorted McCoy. "It's getting to the point that soon I'll run out of stimulants or sedatives - depends on the individual. My sickbay is practically full, Jim. This is getting serious."

"As bad as that? But what can we do? This job has to be done. Another fortnight and we should be at the base. I am surprised that this simple mission should affect us in this manner, however. We've done this kind of routine job time and again, but I don't recall having been so fed up with it before. How come? Your opinion, Doctor?"

"Well, I suppose it's due to the great stress we've been under with the Klingon episode, plus the disappointment of not getting the expected shore leave, accumulated fatigue, boredom, what have you. I'd rather have something definite, an illness, a virus we could overcome with antidotes, rather than this feeling of disinterest, which is so unusual with this crew."

"I know," Kirk reflected, sipping his coffee. "Even the bridge crew is affected, myself included. Only Spock seems to be his usual efficient self."

"He would, of course!" replied McCoy with a snort. "I'll bet he's not even noticed anything is wrong, so enthralled as he must be with his beloved computers. He must be having a ball with all these calculations and triangulations... Well, talk of the devil!" he drawled, looking over Kirk's shoulder. "As I said, he looks fit as a fiddle."

Sure enough, the Vulcan was coming up to their table. "Good morning, Doctor," he said quietly, ignoring McCoy's comment, which - thanks to his sharp ears - he had heard perfectly. "With your permission, Captain?" And placing his tray down on the table Spock took a seat next to Kirk, opposite the doctor.

The Captain leaned on his elbows and began, "Ah Spock, Bones and I were discussing..."

He was suddenly interrupted by an exclamation from the doctor, whose attention was focussed on the First Officer's tray. "Hey Spock, what's that stuff you're eating? That's new - I've never seen anything like it."

Kirk stared at the Vulcan's food, and discovered that what Spock was eating with a hearty appetite looked like a stew of mixed and incredibly coloured elements, ranging from deep purple to chocolate brown and crimson, with streaks of apple green. The mixture looked quite unappetising to the Humans, to say the least, but Mr. Spock seemed to be enjoying it.

"This, Doctor," he declared, taking a large spoonful, "is a new Vulcan recipe which I have programmed into the food processor. The result is quite palatable, although a little lacking in piquancy."

McCoy made a face. "In my opinion, it looks disgusting. I never thought that vegetables could have such colours."

Kirk, on the other hand, always looking for new experiences, took up his spoon and asked for a sample. His First Officer proffered his plate and warned, "I would recommend caution, Captain," but to no avail as Kirk recklessly took a large mouthful. The result was startling: the Captain immediately turned brick red, eyes streaming, gasping like a fish out of water. He blindly groped about, and clutching at the glass of water Spock thoughtfully put into his hand, he drained it to the last drop.

"Whew - that is *HOT!*" gasped the Captain, wiping his eyes.

"I am sorry, Captain..." began Spock, but McCoy was roaring with laughter.

"Jim, your curiosity will be your undoing. Fancy trying some of Spock's diet! You should know better."

"Well, as Spock would say, it was an interesting experience," remarked Kirk, now recovered from the shock. "It's quite tasty really, although too spicy for my taste. What is it, Spock?"

"Mainly mushrooms mixed with some L'kait'l roots," answered the Vulcan, eating his stew with relish.

"Is that so? I'd never have guessed," commented the Captain. "But to come to the point, I was saying when McCoy here interrupted that we were discussing a problem, and I would like your opinion."

Spock took a sip of fruit juice and said in his quiet way, "The problem concerning the crew, I presume?"

His two friends stared at each other. "So much for your bet, Bones!" chuckled the Captain. "So you've also noticed the uneasy mood of the crew, Spock?"

"I can hardly fail to notice, Captain. In spite of my mental shields I find this deep feeling of unrest rather disquieting; and just now, on my way from the bridge, I had to intervene somewhat forcibly in some fisticuffs between a Security guard and a crewman from Maintenance."

"There you are, Jim," interjected the doctor. "What did I tell you? Now it's come to blows."

Kirk looked grim. "Was it serious, Spock?"

"Not very, Captain. I sent the guard with the black eye to sickbay, and the other to his quarters to be confined there until further orders."

"All right. Hmmm... let's see... We need another couple of weeks to finish this damn tedious job. Is there any way you could get it done faster, Mr. Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. Considering the area we still have to cover, I estimate the completion of the survey in fourteen days, 4.32 hours, approximately."

"Approximately, eh?" replied Kirk with a quizzical glance; he never failed to be amused by his Science Officer's accuracy.

"There could be a way of gaining three days, however," the Vulcan went on. "If you allowed me to work non-stop, round the clock, we could..."

"Out of the question!" interrupted the doctor. "Your Vulcan physiology might sustain the strain, Spock - though I wouldn't bet on it - but the crew are only Human, and given their present condition I'm sure that would be the last straw. Sorry to have to barge in like that, Jim, but the health of your crew is my concern, after all."

"Quite, Bones. I know. Well, Spock, we'll take the time necessary, and hope that there won't be any nervous breakdowns, or any more trouble. Then as fast as we can make it to Starbase 10 and shore leave."

"Okay," said McCoy, "that's fine, but what do we do in the meantime? Hoping for the best isn't enough, Jim - we have to do something."

"If you have a sufficient supply of the appropriate drugs to last a couple of weeks..."

"Jim, it's beyond any medical treatment - it's become a psychological problem. I believe they need some kind of activity radically different from routine, something not too demanding, but enough to excite their interest. I don't know... some kind of recreation, something unusual..."

"Bones, they have all the entertainments they could wish for in the rec room," began the Captain, but his First Officer, who had been listening to the discussion with mild interest, intervened.

"With your permission, Captain, I think the doctor has an interesting point."

Both men turned their full attention to the Vulcan. McCoy, quite taken aback by this unusual approval, said, "Spock, is it possible? Do you mean to say that you agree with me?"

"In a way, yes, Doctor. I agree with your diagnosis and your prescription. Also, I believe there is a simple means to ease the stress of the crew, and keep them happily occupied until the end of this mission."

"Oh? And what is it?" inquired Kirk, surprised.

"Is it something the Vulcans do to shake off their spleen?" drawled McCoy.

"Doctor," Spock replied unperturbed, "spleen is a disease unknown on Vulcan. No, what I propose is a Terran cure for a Terran illness. It has been used with success on your planet in different forms for millennia.

"Yesterday," he went on, taking the pose he favoured when about to begin a long explanation, "while searching through the historical data of the library, I found that in the course of their history Humans have been the prey of recurring fits of prostration, despair, even self-accusation, due either to natural causes or to regrettable events created by themselves, such as wars, revolutions, epidemics, etc. It seems also that at some fixed periods these feelings of depression were even induced in certain communities for religious purposes.

"Consequently the authorities, knowing that after such bouts of stress a reaction was not only necessary but unavoidable, and wishing to control the excess of excitement which might result from it, allowed or even organised some kind of festivity. For example, to mention a few, the Saturnalia in ancient Rome, the Fools' Festival in medieval Europe, and after the hardships and fasting of winter the Mardi-Gras, or Carnival. Therefore, Captain, since the crew seems to be in the same depressed mood that I referred to, my advice is to use the same antidote and organise a Carnival on the Enterprise."

Both the doctor and the Captain stared in amazement at the imperturbable Vulcan.

"Jim," McCoy declared at last, "I can't believe it. We were racking our brains to find a way to keep up the morale of the crew, and here comes this walking computer to deliver a lecture on our own history and who, cool as you please, recommends we turn them loose

on the ship carousing in orgiastic Bacchanalia!"

With an outraged eyebrow raised Mr. Spock replied stiffly, "Do not misunderstand me, Doctor. I would never suggest that such collective hysteria could be beneficial to the crew."

"Oh no?" said McCoy, ready for an argument. "You mentioned the Roman Saturnalia. If my memory is correct, Saturnalia were not exactly altar boys' processions!"

"I am well aware of the fact, Doctor. I only mentioned them as an example of Human aberration. Naturally that kind of carousal would be most disreputable on a Starship of the Fleet. A more proper psychodrama should be recommended. However, if my suggestion does not meet with your approval..."

"On the contrary, Spock," said the Captain, regarding his friend with affection, "in my opinion that's a wonderful idea. Once more you've solved our problem. What do you think, McCoy?"

"I think," replied the doctor, "that perhaps I should report Spock to the Medical Council of the Federation for illegal practice of medicine and psychotherapy."

"Oh come on, Bones - don't be silly!" Kirk interjected.

"But," went on McCoy, "on second thoughts I don't believe I'll denounce him because that's just what I should have recommended if I'd been sharp enough to think of it. In other words, Spock, I quite agree with you! Remember this day, Jim - for the first time Spock and I are in agreement. You must record this historical event in the ship's log!"

"Allow me to disagree with you on that point, Doctor," put in the Vulcan, his face expressionless.

"What, already?" exclaimed McCoy with mock despair.

"Yes, indeed. You should recall that we have shared opinions before this day."

"Well come to think of it, you may be right, Spock. So shall I say now that I agree with your disagreement?"

"That'll do!" intervened the Captain. "Will you two please stop this new game of yours and come to the point. So far Spock's proposal is approved and accepted, right? Good. Now we'll have to discuss the arrangements, and that done I'll make a ship-wide announcement. No objections?"

"It's okay with me, Jim," said the doctor.

"Captain, before we decide anything else," Spock added, "may I suggest that we take Lt. Uhura into our confidence? She is well-versed in this kind of entertainment, and her assistance might be invaluable."

So Uhura, who was chatting over coffee with some friends at a nearby table, was hailed by McCoy, given a seat, and on being apprised of the news, let out a whoop of delight. All this excitement at the senior officers' table could not fail to attract the attention of the others, and soon the mess room was astir with curiosity.

"You see," commented McCoy, "how their interest is already aroused, even though they know nothing about the party yet."

"Quite right," said Kirk, "but we'd better adjourn to my quarters, where we'll have more privacy. Come along." He stood up and left, taking his senior officers with him.

They had hardly left before the chatter and guesswork broke loose, and the grapevine was so efficient on the Enterprise that within half an hour the whole ship knew that the Command staff were 'up to something.'

An hour later, after a quick shower and change, Mr. Spock was back at his station engaged in the mapping routine, and Mr. Sulu was still in the command chair, when a signal was heard at the communications console, and Penny Palmer answered.

"Yes, sir - I'll put you through right away."

Sulu looked up with a questioning glance and she said quietly as she flicked the lever to shipwide intercom, "The Captain wants to make an announcement."

This brought all heads up, for the Captain's announcements were usually delivered from the bridge. Some glances were directed at the First Officer, who coolly ignored them, but before any questions could be asked Kirk's voice was heard all over the ship.

"This is the Captain speaking. I require your full attention, please. As you are aware, our mapping survey is well in progress according to schedule, and will be completed in the allotted time. During these last two missions the crew has been exemplary, and will be duly commended in our report to headquarters.

"However, the Command staff, to express their satisfaction and to celebrate the completion of this mission, have decided to devote the time necessary for the return to Starbase 10 to a huge Carnival party."

There was total surprise on the bridge, on the whole ship, then exclamations and cheers erupted, soon to be silenced by fierce hushes as the Captain's voice continued imperturbably.

"... not going to be a regular fancy dress affair. We can do better than that. The regulations will be posted in the rec rooms, and on every deck, but let me say briefly that the theme is to be fiction. Any kind of fiction, from classic literature to science fiction, sagas, mythologies, music, etc. No historical character is allowed, since we have done that before. To make the competition more interesting, the costumes and the characters chosen will have to reflect the personality of each of us - or its opposite. Masks are recommended; secrecy is, of course, the rule. This will be a challenge to all of us. You have more than a week to prepare. Use your imagination, all the means at your disposal, including the library computer. I rely on your ingenuity, but one thing is certain: everyone must participate, no exceptions will be accepted. Shifts will be fixed accordingly, since naturally the Carnival must not interfere with the ship's duties.

"Oh, and one last word," said the Captain after a brief pause and with the ghost of suppressed laughter, "should any of you be at



a loss for the choice of adequate subject and costume, I recommend you apply to Mr. Spock, whose encyclopedic knowledge is invaluable. Kirk out."

All the attention was now focused on the First Officer, who at the Captain's words had raised his head from the console, looking as surprised as any Vulcan could be. A ripple of laughter ran round the bridge as Mr. Sulu, swivelling the command chair, looked up and commented, "We didn't know you were an expert on fancy dress, Mr. Spock."

Spock looked down at them, an eyebrow tilted up to his glossy fringe. "Neither did I, Mr. Sulu, but the Captain seems to believe so."

Laughter and chatter followed the statement, and Chekov saw his chance to put a question. "With your permission, Mr. Spock, may I ask what costume you think I should wear? Peter the Great I would like!"

"Peter the Great was not a fictitious character, as you well know, Mr. Chekov, but I am sure you can find some ideas in old Russian tradition and literature. The Cossacks you are so fond of referring to would be appropriate, don't you think?"

"Ah yes, that's right. Thank you, Mr. Spock," exclaimed Chekov, his eyes bright with pleasure.

"And what about me?" inquired Sulu. "Do you think that d'Artagnan...?"

"Obviously the best choice, Mr. Sulu. I seem to recall a remarkable performance of fencing some time ago, and with three of your students you should do honour to the regiment of the King's Musketeers."

Sulu laughed with delight, joined by the bridge staff who were excited with anticipation. Chekov, emboldened by the festive mood, asked the question everyone was eager to hear answered.

"Mr. Spock, which character will you personify?"

The Vulcan, who had resumed his work, looked back at him patiently. "You know that I never participate in the theatricals and fancy dress balls of the Enterprise."

"Oh Mr. Spock, you must!" cried pretty Lt. Palmer. "The Captain just said that everyone, without exception, has to join in and masquerade for the Carnival."

A slight expression of annoyance crossed the First Officer's austere features. "A Vulcan never indulges in these childish pranks, Lieutenant."

"But those are the Captain's orders. Please, Mr. Spock, can't you make an exception, just for this occasion?" pleaded the blonde girl.

As the others joined in her entreaty Spock looked around, somewhat surprised at their insistence, but also secretly pleased to observe that his suggestion to the Captain had produced a satisfactory result. The crew were not listless any more; the announcement of the party had effectively snapped them out of their

apathy. Turning back to Penny Palmer he announced, "Of course I know the Captain's order, Lieutenant, but I am afraid there isn't a character I can choose."

Uhura, coming out of the turbolift and startled to see that her colleagues had deserted their stations to gather round the First Officer, asked what the matter was. Informed of the grave problem in debate, she joined in the discussion.

"Mr. Spock, what about Vulcan mythology? I would be surprised if there weren't any heroes in your legends or literature you might impersonate."

Mr. Spock reflected for a few seconds, then declared, "There are indeed popular figures in our ancient sagas, mostly chiefs of prominent clans, legendary warriors, but there is an impossibility - the question of costume."

"How is that?" Everyone's curiosity heightened considerably.

"The fact is that the attire of primitive Vulcans was rather a state of undress. Apart from a crude bejewelled metal torc around their necks, some skins around their hips, and their weapons, they hardly wore anything at all."

This explanation was met with great interest, particularly by the feminine elements of the audience, who exchanged meaningful glances, imagining their First Officer in that costume.

"Wow!" exclaimed Uhura with a laugh, saying aloud what many were thinking. "You'd look gorgeous in that attire, Mr. Spock!"

Whether the Vulcan failed to understand the implications or chose to ignore them it was difficult to tell; however, the fact remained that he merely replied with his usual composure, "I regret to say, Miss Uhura, that I must decline your suggestion for the simple reason that nowadays it would be impossible to procure the lematya hide necessary for the loincloth, therefore I cannot join you in the disguise competition. And now," he continued, "I believe we have spent too much time already on this matter, which would be better discussed when off duty. Will you all please return to your stations."

This request was followed by a concert of, "Yes, sir," as everyone resumed duty. However Chekov could be heard saying, "We have to find a disguise for Mr. Spock. I'll bet I have an idea."

Several days later, in the privacy of his quarters, Captain Kirk was happily humming the latest ditty while busy polishing the steel blade of an old-fashioned navy sabre. He suddenly realised that he had not done so for months, and marvelled once again at the amazing change which had taken place on his ship in a matter of a few days. Gone was the gloomy, dispirited mood which had prevailed for weeks among the crew. Everyone was now full of enthusiasm and anxious to be ready for the Carnival. Just that morning McCoy had reported with great satisfaction that except for a case of quinsy and a broken ankle, his sickbay was so quiet that he and his medical staff were able to turn all their attention to the preparation of their fancy dress.

Kirk could feel the excitement increase as the days went by.

From the start there had been a great demand for information from the ship's library, to such an extent that Mr. Spock had had to draw up lists of crew members to take turns at the computer lest its circuits should blow from the strain.

Poor Spock, reflected Kirk. The Vulcan had almost lost his legendary self control at that, his concern for the safety of the ship's brain taking precedence over his natural courtesy and patience.

Then there had been that argument with McCoy about Spock's disguise. Kirk chuckled as he recalled their heated discussion. Naturally Spock wished to be exempted from the obligation of wearing fancy dress, and when both his friends tried to convince him that since the Carnival had been his idea in the first place he was in honour bound to participate, and could not stay away from the fun, his last defence had been that he could not find any suitable character.

At that McCoy had exclaimed, "Come on, Spock, it's child's play. You'll just have to slip on scarlet tights and black boots, drape yourself in a black cloak lined with red silk, and you'll be His Satanic Majesty Mephisto in the flesh!"

This worn out jest had of course provoked a sharp retort in an icy tone. "Your costume is as easy and as obvious to devise, Doctor. You just dab some paint on your face, stick some feathers on your head, and with your beads and your rattles you will admirably personify the Cherokee medicine man."

McCoy had reacted in his usual clamorous way, alluding in unflattering terms to pointy ears, green blood, and other Vulcan characteristics.

At last Kirk, shaking with laughter, had had to step between his friends in order to put an end to what promised to be a first-class wrangle.

Spock had stiffly taken his leave, saying he had much to do elsewhere, but not without a Parthian shot from McCoy.

"Spock," the doctor had called, "take my word for it - with your looks you can't pass for anything but a green-blooded devil. I dare you to find yourself another disguise!"

The Vulcan, already on the threshold, had frozen for a fraction of a second, then looking round he had shot back such a defiant glance at McCoy that Kirk had been sure there could not be any doubt that Spock was taking up the challenge.

Remembering the scene, the Captain shook his head, wondering what Spock would imagine - or to use the Vulcan mode, what he would logically devise.

At least the First Officer had had a great idea for his Captain's costume, Kirk thought, looking with satisfaction at the dashing uniform displayed on his bed. He picked up the gold-braided hat and, placing it on his head, gazed complacently at his reflection in the mirror.

"Not bad. Not bad at all," he murmured. Then, gathering the costume, sword, hat and all, he stored it in a closet which he

locked carefully. It was to be kept a secret until the party.

"Just look at this, Christine. Isn't it gorgeous?" Lt. Uhura was displaying to her friend Nurse Chapel a long tunic of shimmering fabric in a deep blue shade sparkling with gold and silver trimming.

"It's beautiful," said Chapel in a hushed tone. "Where in the world did you get that?"

"The library computer, my dear - nothing but a plain piece of hardware. Truly, I never thought that the uniform and costume section could produce such a beauty."

"Don't forget who's responsible for the data processing, Nyota. Like master, like servant, as they say. But what is it supposed to represent?"

"The gown of the Queen of Night. Actually, I rather fancied the Queen of Sheba," explained Uhura with a laugh. "With my appearance I thought that was the best choice. Rather conceited, aren't we? But Mr. Spock, when I consulted him, pointed out that the Queen of Sheba was most probably a historical character. So that was it - I couldn't do it. Then I asked him what else he could suggest. He looked at me - you know, with that searching gaze he has sometimes that makes you feel you are just a bun in his lab or something - and at last he asked me if I would care for another queen, but a fictitious one, a queen of music and dreams. So I said, 'Sure, Mr. Spock. Which queen do you mean?' He reminded me of the concert we attended two years ago on Perry Planet, Mozart's Magic Flute, and said that he believed that the role of the Queen of the Night would be appropriate for a music lover like me. That's why I'll still be a queen at the party."

"What a wonderful idea!" said Christine Chapel.

"Yes, indeed. And would you believe that Spock even lent me his video tape of the opera so that I could study the character, the costume, everything, at leisure. Isn't he a dear?"

"Yes, I know that he's been very helpful," said the nurse. "I heard that many people have sought his advice for their fancy dress, and everyone has been delighted with his suggestions."

"Not everyone, Christine," laughed Uhura. "Not Jessie Cooper, at least. Did you hear about it? No? Oh, it's so funny. You know Cooper, don't you? So affected, so pleased with herself, always putting on airs, showing her legs... Sorry, but I can't stand the girl."

"Neither can I, Nyota. You should see her simpering at Dr. McCoy when she comes for her physicals."

"I can imagine! And remember how she tried her seductive act on our Vulcan? She soon realised her mistake! Well the other day, in the rec room; Mr Spock happened to pass by, and she went mincing up to him, with her silly smile. 'Oh, Mr. Spock, sir,'" mimicked Uhura in a falsetto voice, "'I don't want to interrupt you, I'm sure, but I would like your advice for my fancy dress. I thought that perhaps Lady Godiva would suit me - you know, with my figure. What do you think?' And there she was, preening herself, showing off... I could have slapped her face! You know, some men would

fall for that sort of nonsense. I imagine poor Chekov, for instance..."

"But not Mr. Spock," stated Chapel with a confident smile.

"Of course not - not our dear old Spock. Well, he just glanced over her coldly, then said at his most cutting, 'Your choice is impractical, Ensign.' So she said, 'But why, Mr. Spock?' 'First,' he said, 'your hair is too short, and second, there is unfortunately no way on the ship, even with our most sophisticated computers, to produce the horse. Therefore you will have to look for another theme.' If you had seen her face! She was crimson - all the more because everyone was laughing at her. It served her right. She wanted to attract attention, and she got it. I was so pleased with Spock, I could have kissed him."

"And what stopped you?" her friend asked slyly.

"He had already gone, my dear. Too bad," replied Uhura with a wink, and the two girls laughed, knowing very well that to try and kiss Mr. Spock amounted to trying to square the circle. "But I'm rattling on, Christine, and you haven't told me that you have decided on for your fancy dress - unless you wish to keep it a secret?"

"Oh no." Nurse Chapel shook her head. "Not from you, anyway. But I haven't made up my mind yet. I don't quite know. I've thought of a princess from a fairytale, maybe, or a legend... I don't have any idea, really."

"Well, it's just as well your friends have ideas for you," declared Uhura triumphantly. "I asked Spock about you."

"Nyota! You didn't! Oh no!"

"Why not, while I was on the subject of fancy dress?" replied Uhura matter-of-factly. "I asked him if he could think of a legendary princess or queen who would suit your looks, and contrast with my character."

"And what did he say?" asked Chapel with a tremulous smile.

"Well, after deep thought and reflection, he had some interesting suggestions: Queen Guinevere; Isold, the sweetheart of Tristram; and a queen from Hans Andersen, the Snow Queen. Well, what do you think of that?" inquired Uhura as her friend looked puzzled.

"I don't quite know. Apart from Guinevere and King Arthur, I'm afraid I'm not familiar with those characters."

"Why don't you look into the data, Christine? I'm sure you'll obtain all the information you need, and when you have decided, how about discussing your dress between us?"

Christine Chapel agreed heartily with Uhura's suggestion, and some time later she reviewed the themes suggested by Spock on her desk viewer. She soon rejected Queen Guinevere, who had betrayed her king and caused disaster in Arthur's kingdom. Isold, the blonde lover of Tristram, was more appealing. Faithful to the death... but what a tragic end.

Chapel wondered why Spock had thought of those medieval and

doomed heroines for her. Was it because of the painful events which had caused the death of Roger Corby, her former fiance, or could it be a vague hint of her hopeless love for Spock himself, and his inability to respond to that love? Who could tell?

Christine shook her head, and with a sigh touched the control of her viewscreen, calling for the data on Andersen's fairy tales. An amazing number of titles followed one another on the screen, then it froze, and she scanned the adventures of the two children in the kingdom of the Snow Queen.

Leaning back in her chair, a dreamy expression in her blue eyes, she again pondered on Spock's curious choice. *Strange, she thought, does he really see me as this cold, mysterious fairy who appears and disappears in snow storms, lives in an ice-bound palace by the Pole, and whose kiss gives oblivion? He is the cold and distant one, not I! If he would only let me, I would show him how warm and ardent I can be!* She remained deep in thought for a while, and the more she thought about it the more intrigued she became with this Snow Queen, this mysterious figure, cold and pure as snow, beautiful like an unattainable dream.

Finally she switched off the viewscreen. Her decision was made.

On the senior officers' deck a figure was walking stealthily along the corridor, and passing a bright light on the bulkhead was revealed as the Chief Navigator, Mr. Chekov. Stopping in front of a door marked with the science department insignia, he looked right and left, then after some hesitation pressed the buzzer.

A deep voice called "Enter," and the door slid open. The young man stepped in, and found himself in the red and stifling atmosphere of Vulcan.

The First Officer, seated at his desk, looked up enquiringly. "Yes, Mr. Chekov?"

"Sir," said the ensign, "may I talk to you for a minute? If I'm not intruding, I mean."

"You are not, Mr. Chekov. Come and sit down."

Chekov sat on the edge of the chair facing the desk and watched his senior officer complete his writing, then fold the sheet of paper and set it aside. Turning his attention to the young Russian the Vulcan inquired, "Now, what is it, Mr. Chekov?"

Chekov swallowed hard, then said bravely, "Well, Mr. Spock, the fact is... I have had an idea!" he announced.

"Very commendable, Ensign," commented Spock dryly. "And what about?"

"It's about your fancy dress, sir. I've thought of something... unless you have already decided, of course," he added lamely, confronted with an enigmatic raised eyebrow.

Spock leaned back in his chair, studying the eager, boyish face. Secretly amused, he answered calmly, "No, I have not made any choice yet, mainly because I have not so far had enough time to give

it much thought. Therefore I shall be interested to hear this idea of yours."

Chekov, all eagerness again, produced a video tape from under his shirt and laid it down on the desk. "You see, it's like this, Mr. Spock. I was watching an old 20th century science fiction film when all of a sudden it occurred to me that in the story there was character to suit you, I think."

"Science fiction, Mr. Chekov? I must say, you disappoint me. A Starfleet officer specialising in sciences should know better."

"Sorry, Mr. Spock, but it is just for fun," explained the young Russian. "I know it's scientific rubbish, but it's so thrilling, and in a way it's also instructive. I mean, it shows you how wrong they were about the future, so it may be useful as a historical document."

"Mmm... I admit that your chain of reasoning does not lack logic. As a matter of information, what is the name of the character that would suit me in that... Er, what is the name of the film?"

"The Empire Strikes Back."

The Vulcan winced visibly, but Chekov, so taken was he by his subject, went on breezily, "The empire is the realm of evil, the party of the villains, and their leader is the mysterious Vader. You must watch the video, sir - you'll see. He's wonderful - dark, evil, with his black cloak, his black helmet, his light sabre... He's so powerful! So, I thought you'd look great in that costume."

This time both Vulcan eyebrows shot right up as the First Officer gazed silently at his young colleague who, seeing the evidence of something like amazement on the Vulcan's face, realised with dismay what his words implied.

"Oh Mr. Spock..." he stammered, red to his hairline, "I'm terribly sorry. I didn't mean to say that you are like this horrible Vader, sir. Quite the contrary - you are so... so... I mean, we all think you are the guardian angel of the Enterprise."

"Don't you think you might be overdoing it, Mr. Chekov?" Spock asked mildly, watching the navigator, his head tilted like a bird.

"Ah... yes, sir... I mean, no..." Poor Chekov floundered helplessly in his explanations, but a curt command brought him back to the point.

"Kindly keep to the matter in hand, Mr. Chekov. What other reason did you have to choose this Vader for my masquerade?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I was under the impression that you did not care to go disguised like the rest of us."

The Vulcan merely assented with a nod.

"So," went on Chekov, "I thought that maybe you wouldn't mind so long as you could go undetected. You will see on the tape that Darth Vader is wearing black from head to foot. A black helmet with a kind of mask covers his head, so you - or anybody - could dress as Vader and nobody could guess."

This time Chekov had the First Officer's full attention. "I see..." murmured Spock as a speculative expression stole over his regular features. "This might be interesting - the perfect incognito..."

"Yes, indeed, sir," put in the Russian. "Nobody could tell, except for the voice."

"That would not offer any difficulty, Ensign. A simple synthesiser device would serve the purpose."

"Yes, that would be the very thing, Mr. Spock. It would change your voice."

"We shall see. In the meantime I shall keep your tape for study, and think about it. Naturally, Mr. Chekov, I need hardly recommend complete secrecy on the matter."

"Of course, Mr. Spock. Nobody knows anything. It's just between you and me, sir." As Chekov got to his feet he was stopped by a question.

"Have you decided yet on your own costume?"

"Yes, sir, I followed your advice. My costume is ready, and it is beautiful. I shall be a Colonel of Cossacks, sir!" With those proud words the young Russian departed, delighted to share such an important secret with his mentor.

Spock remained motionless for a while, reflecting on the paradox of the situation. He had been asked for advice by any number of the crew over the last few days, and here he was offered a fascinating suggestion for his own disguise by the youngest member of the bridge staff. It was true that young Chekov let his imagination run away with him too often, but he also had a good idea now and then. And this Vader character seemed to be a good idea... a very good idea indeed.

A gleam of what looked very like guile shone in the dark eyes, and the ghost of a smile lifted the corners of the stern mouth. Fortunately there were no witnesses, and the unlikely display of emotion was gone almost instantly. Then the Vulcan picked up the video tape, slipped it into the slot, and settled to watch - not without some perplexity - this much despised science fiction film.

Ten days later...

As the first weeks of patrol and charting had seemed to drag endlessly along, the last week had seemed quite short to the crew, so relieved were they to find that this tedious mission had come to its end at last.

When the Science Officer brought his final report to the Captain, the latter could not refrain from comment.

"So this is the last one, is it, Mr. Spock? Good. I'm sure that like the rest of us you must be glad this is over," Kirk said, running his eyes down the document. As no reply came he glanced up at his friend, to be confronted with a mildly puzzled gaze.

"Come on, Spock," he teased, "don't tell me that you took any



interest in this routine survey? Not the slightest discovery, not the smallest phenomenon, not the faintest nebula to get your teeth into. Aren't you somewhat disappointed, not to say frustrated, by such a poor result?"

An arched eyebrow quivered slightly as Spock replied formally, "I have to acknowledge, Captain, that this mission has been somewhat uneventful, but I do not see how it should affect either my dentition or my diet."

"Oh lord, Spock!" Kirk moaned, while the bridge crew giggled. "Why do you have to take my words so literally? Never mind," he went on hastily to prevent a long Vulcan explanation, "we know that nothing of the kind can affect you. But to say that this charting mission has been uneventful ranks as one of your best euphemisms, and god knows you're an expert at the game. Now, I take it we don't need to linger any longer in this sector, and that we can at last set course for the Starbase?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Right. Mr. Chekov, kindly plot the most direct course possible to Starbase 10, and don't lose a second, for heaven's sake."

"Aye, sir," the Navigator answered with ill disguised enthusiasm; then after a few moments of feverish activity he announced, "Course plotted and locked in, sir. ETA to Base, three days five hours."

"Splendid!" said the Captain. "That will give us ample time for the party. Mr. Sulu, take her out, warp 4."

"Aye, sir, warp 4."

"Mr. Spock," Kirk continued, standing up, "will you take the con for a moment? I'll go down to my quarters and have a better look at your report."

The First Officer merely nodded, stepped down from the upper gallery, and settled in the command chair, but as soon as the Captain had entered the turbolift he pointed out calmly, "Mr. Chekov, I would recommend you to be more accurate in your estimation. We shall reach Starbase 10 in 3 days, 5.356 hours."

"Yes, sir," replied Chekov dutifully, exchanging a meaningful glance with Sulu. Trust Mr. Spock not to overlook the slightest failing in his young colleagues! But Chekov did not mind the mild reproofs from the First Officer, the more so now that he shared his secret. He, Chekov, was the only person on the Enterprise to 'know'.

Some hours later strange and surprising events began to take place on the good ship Enterprise. First a symphonic piece identified by connoisseurs as Berlioz' Carnival Romain blared through the ship's intercom system. Then after a bugle call the Captain's voice was heard declaring the Enterprise Carnival officially open. More music followed, an eclectic selection of appropriate pieces ranging from brass band music in the style of the Nice or New Orleans Carnivals to the haunting rhythms of the Brazilian sambas of Rio. This musical atmosphere, which at once put

everyone into a festive mood, had been concocted by the First Officer and the Chief Communications Officer, both musical experts, who had programmed the central computer to broadcast a selection of suitable compositions for the next three days.

Soon the corridors began to swarm with excited crew members, some just off duty and running to their quarters to get ready for the party, others already fully rigged out and masked making their way with much merriment to the main rec room, which had been turned into a festival hall.

This hall was a sight indeed. The large room was unrecognisable. Thanks to the skill of a maintenance team who had worked around the clock under the supervision of Lt. Uhura, the rather bare looking rec room had been turned into a fairy-tale palace.

Glittering chandeliers and spotlights had been fixed in every possible place. Their lights, gold, white, pink, were reflected to infinity by huge mirrors set up in strategic positions to give the illusion of a much larger hall. From the ceiling hung miles of paper streamers and garlands, emphasised by multi-coloured Chinese lanterns which were also reflected in the mirrors. The tables had been pushed along the walls, and were loaded with refreshments and drinks; at the end of the hall stood a raised platform, lavishly decorated, prepared for the fancy dress competition.

This magnificent achievement was duly appreciated with cheers and clapping as the masqueraders walked in. They were directed down the hall to the stage, where they were welcomed by a smart Master of Ceremonies in tail coat and top hat, who invited them to step up and parade their fancy dress to the audience. Then, once they were recorded, they would join their friends to watch and applaud the newcomers. The great fun was to try and guess the identity of everyone else, particularly the officers.

The hall was already crowded when from the corridor came the sound of male voices singing an old sea chanty; then in marched a band of seamen, buccaneers, privateers and mariners of all kinds, who in spite of their makeup and black eye patches were immediately identified and cheered by their comrades as the Security Squad. Foremost walked their Chief, Lt. Johnson, superb as the Flying Dutchman. In the group some interesting figures caught the eye, such as Jason carrying a golden fleece on his shoulders; two gigantic and flaxen-haired Vikings; Sinbad the Sailor in colourful bolero and baggy pants; a bearded Captain Ahab holding a big balloon in the shape of a white whale; and bringing up the rear the wicked Captain Hook, complete with sabre, hook and black beard, escorting two charming characters, Peter Pan in a green suit, and a delightful Tinkerbelle, attired in a flimsy chiffon dress trimmed with tiny bells that jingled at every step.

They all had a well deserved success, particularly the last two, the only female members of Security. Once on the stage the whole team spread out in a wide arc, leaving the central space vacant, then the Master of Ceremonies greeted with all due respect a dashing gentleman who was none other than Captain Horatio Hornblower.

He looked truly superb in his 18th century dress uniform of neat navy-blue coat trimmed with gold braid, white breeches and stockings; he was elegant from the top of his tricorne hat to the silver buckles of his shoes. Though the upper half of his face was

hidden by a black velvet half mask, the firm line of the mouth and jaw, and the familiar set of the head, could not be mistaken.

"It's the Captain! It's Captain Kirk!" ran through the room.

Seeing that he was recognised, Kirk took off his hat and with a flourish saluted the company. The cheering and clapping became so deafening that the smiling Captain turned around, presented his escort, and after a last bow they all left the stage and mingled with the crowd.

Kirk, taking the Chief of Security aside, said in a low voice, "Mr. Johnston, most of your men are off duty for the party, of course, but I would like them to keep an eye on things - unobtrusively, you understand - to prevent any over-excitement and unpleasantness."

"Aye, Captain. Leave it to me. I'll pass the word."

Once easy about that matter, Kirk remained standing by the platform to enjoy the pageantry, and the comical patter of Ensign Valentino of Communications, who played the part of Master of Ceremonies to perfection. He watched with pleasure the parade of numerous fairy-tale characters: Snow White and Prince Charming; Little Red Riding Hood, accompanied by a huge black wolf dressed like Grandmother with spectacles, nightcap and all, whom everyone identified as Lt. Petersen of Engineering, the biggest man on the Enterprise; the romantic couple of Beauty and the Beast; Puss in Boots, strutting along in boots reaching up to his waist; and of course Alice, out of Wonderland, walking hand in hand with a charming White Rabbit complete with top hat, white spats, and striped waistcoat enhanced by a huge chain with a gold watch.

Kirk was laughing and clapping with the rest of the crew when a familiar voice drawled in his ear, "Enjoying yourself, Jim?"

The Captain looked round and stared, then burst out laughing. There, smiling at him, blue eyes twinkling behind silver pince-nez, stood an elderly gentleman whose rosy face, framed by bushy salt-and-pepper sideburns, expressed humour and benevolence.

"McCoy! Is that you?" exclaimed Hornblower. "You're wonderful - but who are you supposed to be?" He looked him up and down, taking in the stiff starched collar bound with a voluminous cravat, and the old-fashioned frock coat and striped trousers.

"My dear fellow, I'm just an old country doctor, as you very well know, so I thought that this Victorian outfit would be the proper dress for me to wear."

"Indeed, you look and speak just like a picture out of a Dickens novel. But where were you? How come I didn't see you in the parade?"

"I've been here almost from the start," replied McCoy, "and I haven't missed a thing. What do you think of them all, eh?"

"I must say that I'm amazed at the imagination and the taste displayed by the crew. And they're all enjoying themselves hugely - just listen to them! By the way, did you notice Alice and the White Rabbit? Didn't they raise pleasant memories, Bones?"

"They sure did," replied the Doctor with a chuckle. "We had

such a good time on that planet. But look, Jim!" he went on, pointing to a smart Scotsman on the stage. "Right behind Robin Hood and Friar Tuck - isn't that Scotty?"

And indeed a Scottish Chieftain in full rig, including targe and claymore, followed by stalwart lads from his clan, was proudly pacing the platform to the sound of a Highland reel. When the Master of Ceremonies loudly announced Rob Roy and his gillies, they were duly and loudly cheered, then Mr. Scott and his company left the stage and made their way straight to the refreshment tables.

Close on their heels came swaggering in four gallant gentlemen sporting on their doublets the white cross of the Musketeers. From the jaunty set of their plumed hats, and the way they twirled their moustaches, it was obvious that they were ready to challenge any of the Cardinal's Guard who happened to pass by. Once on the stage all four stood at attention, and whipping their swords out of their scabbards shouted their slogan, "One for all, and all for one!"

Their success was complete, and the applause was barely abating when, to the lively strains of a mazurka a smart looking Colonel of Cossacks arrived, leading a bevy of Slavonic beauties. Their colourful skirts twirling around shiny boots, and their tiaras adorned with flowing ribbons and flowers, contrasted strikingly with the black and gold uniform of the Russian cavalry colonel.

D'Artagnan, who in the meantime had joined the Captain and Doctor, laughed and declared, "Look at Pavel! A Colonel of Cossacks, indeed! I'd like to see him on a horse!"

"He sure looks smart and dandy, and so do you, Mr. Sulu," said Captain Hornblower with a grin. "You've missed your calling - you were born to be d'Artagnan. But I haven't seen Uhura yet, or any of your sickbay team, Bones. Have you any idea of their disguise? You must be in on the secret, I'm sure."

"Well, from the little I've seen, Jim, I can say that you can prepare yourself for a surprise - a very pleasant surprise."

"Is that so?" asked the Captain, interested.

"Yes indeed," went on McCoy. "I understand that both Uhura and Christine took their ideas from Spock, and kind of embroidered on the theme."

"As I suspected," commented Kirk, "our Science Officer has proved invaluable in this as well. But I wonder where he is? I hope we haven't missed him in this crowd. I've no idea who he'll be - he's been so secretive about it."

"When he chooses to be close-mouthed, that damn Vulcan can beat a whole bed of clams and oysters," declared the Doctor with a snort. "But never fear, Jim. I've been on the lookout from the beginning - I wouldn't have missed him, whatever disguise he assumed."

The young Colonel of Cossacks, arriving just at that moment and overhearing the comments, did not say anything - but his brief smile spoke volumes.

The whining sound of oriental music announced the arrival of an exotic caravan out of the Arabian Nights, and interrupted the conversation. There was a burst of laughter at the sight of two big

brown camels rolling along like true ships of the desert, led by mysterious sheiks draped in flowing djellabas, their faces veiled by silken keffieh. It seemed, however, that the hind legs of the beats were somewhat out of step with their forelegs, causing a rather comical undulation of their humped backs.

Gradually the music faded into the famous theme of Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade, and surrounded by a retinue of shahs and viziers in dazzling brocade, the bewitching Sheherazade glided in with mincing steps. Immediately the audience gasped and stared, and wolf-whistles sounded here and there; for except for the large striped sash draped around her hips, and the sequined veil masking her face, the few transparent veils of her exotic attire hardly concealed anything of her anatomy.

"Good lord!" exclaimed McCoy, peering over his pince-nez. "Look at the gal! I wonder who she is?"

"Whoever she is, Bones, you can't deny she's quite an eye-ful," replied Kirk with a chuckle.

"I think I know who she is, Captain," put in Sulu. "Ensign Cooper from Maintenance."

"Ah ha!" cried the Doctor. "Trust a French Musketeer to be in on a lady's secret. But you could be right - she's very like her. Not exactly the shrinking violet, that Miss Cooper."

"I was told she meant to go as Lady Godiva," added Sulu with a derisive smile, "but Mr. Spock did not approve, and told her so to her face."

"A very commendable response from our First Officer," commented the Captain, enjoying himself. "After all, we must keep things within proper limits, mustn't we?"

"Tch!" snorted McCoy. "For all the good that has done. Look how she managed to get round his veto. For all his logic our Vulcan is no match for tricky females, Jim."

In the meantime the oriental party had completed their turn on the stage, and the enchantress, with a jingling of bracelets, anklets and sequins, was leaving with her followers and their camels, the latter quite glad to take off their stifling headgear and stand upright.

The rec room was now quite crowded, as the pageant was almost coming to its end, but Mr. Spock was still nowhere to be seen, and both the Captain and the Doctor were beginning to wonder if he was, after all, going to shirk the masquerade.

Actually, Mr. Spock was in his quarters watching the show on his viewer. The Captain had decided that the skeleton crew on duty should not miss the Carnival parade, so it was broadcast throughout the ship for anyone who cared to watch. Spock, after leaving the bridge at the end of his shift, had come down to his cabin and - rather reluctantly - had donned his black costume.

He would gladly have missed this uncomfortable situation, but he had promised Kirk he would put in an appearance, and he did not want to disappoint his friend. There was also the challenge from



McCoy, which he had silently accepted, so he was in honour bound to go whether he wanted to or not. He had decided to join the party at the very end of the parade, and he knew that Uhura and Nurse Chapel with their teams would close the show.

One thing, however, particularly bothered the Vulcan. He did not like the idea of being seen walking along the corridor in that attire. He wished he could find another way of quietly appearing in the hall, and pondered the problem while he watched his colleagues on the screen.

Suddenly an idea occurred to him, and his lips curved in the ghost of a smile. He swiftly ran his fingers over the keys of his computer, made rapid and careful calculations, then leaned back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. It would work, provided he took extreme care with the handling of the controls.

Spock switched back to the rec room, and after watching intently for a few moments he switched off the screen, stood up, and quickly put on the long black cloak, hooked the light sabre to his belt, and lastly placed the helmet on his head. Then, after a brief look in the mirror, the Vulcan quietly left his cabin and stealthily, like a black shadow, sidled along the corridor, climbed down a Jeffries tube and headed for a room which he knew would be deserted for the moment.

On the stage of the hall a band of weird-looking characters was parading in a riot of multi-coloured revolving lights. From Superman to Albator, from Goldorak to Barbarella, from Galactica to Star Wars, Science Fiction was unleashed on the Enterprise to a background of ear-splitting synthetic music.

While clapping along with the cheering crowd Colonel Chekov looked anxiously for the tall figure of Darth Vader, but that personage had apparently preferred not to mingle with the noisy group, and would no doubt appear in his own time.

*Just as well, Chekov thought. If he could see this Science Fiction invasion, poor Mr. Spock would have a fit!*

The M.C. had trouble in restoring some order among the excited masqueraders, but finally they left the stage, the wild music faded away, and after a brief moment of silence, keeping the audience in suspense, the melodious theme of the Magic Flute was heard. At the same time the lights of the chandeliers dimmed gradually, and the spotlights, cleverly focused to one side of the platform, revealed a striking apparition. Slowly, with stately tread, a regal figure came into sight; crowned with gold and star-like gems, her face partly masked with diamond-studded velvet, she was clad in a deep blue shimmering gown and a high-collared cloak which also sparkled with spangles and gems. Around her walked other mysterious females, every one crowned with starry tiaras, and dressed alike in tunics and cloaks of rainbow colours.

The spectacle was so breathtaking that for a minute everyone watched entranced under the spell of sight and music. Then frenetic applause thundered as the Master of Ceremonies greeted with due respect the Queen of the Night and her ladies-in-waiting, Stars, Constellations, and Planets - or more prosaically Lt. Uhura and her Communications Department. These ladies bowed gracefully, took two or three turns on the stand to display their fancy dress, then with

perfect dignity stepped down to be greeted by their admiring colleagues.

Uhura, smiling at the compliments, made her way through the crowd, and had just joined the Captain and her fellow officers when an eerie and nostalgic music was heard over the merriment and laughter.

When the music of Grieg had put everyone in an appropriate mood a vision of dream and beauty appeared out of a silver mist. First, masked girls glided in gracefully, their heads crowned with snowflakes, their white dresses glittering with frost. Then a team of white reindeer harnessed with red trappings jingling with silver bells came trotting in. The four animals were pulling a light sledge which mysteriously hovered half a meter above the ground, and was also being pushed by four polar bears.

After parading around the reindeer and the bears came to a halt in a jingle of sleigh bells, and to the watching audience was at last revealed the enigmatic figure seated in the sledge. The snowflake-girls moved forward and helped down their sovereign, the Snow Queen, gorgeous in a silver lame gown, warmed by a hooded cloak shimmering with frost. When she lowered the hood a blonde head was revealed crowned with silver and diamonds, but the face remained concealed by a white velvet mask, through which shone a pair of blue eyes.

The M.C., obviously overcome by the arrival of such a gracious Majesty, courteously bowed and kissed her hand, a gesture which drew an ovation from the company.

"Your staff have done wonders, McCoy," Captain Hornblower commented to the Doctor. "It's remarkably done. Come on, let's go and congratulate them." And Kirk led the way to the side of the stage.

The Snow Queen and her followers, about to leave the stage, were surprised to find a group of smiling friends awaiting them at the foot of the steps. The Queen, gathering her long train in one hand and placing the other hand on the arm offered by Captain Hornblower, stepped daintily down followed by her ladies-in-waiting.

"Miss Christine Chapel, I presume?" the gallant Captain smiled.

"Yes indeed, Captain," she answered with a laugh.

"Christine, my dear," McCoy broke in, "You are just marvellous. You and Uhura here really steal the show."

"What I like best are the reindeer and the sleigh," put in Chekov, a little homesick. "They remind me of our winters at home. But where did you get that beautiful sleigh?"

"I hate to shatter your illusions, Pavel, but the sleigh is just an anti-grav stretcher transformed by the medics for the occasion," Chapel replied. "Well look, here they are."

And there indeed came the four polar bears who, having disposed of the sleigh, were removing their furry heads and heading to the buffet tables for cool drinks.

They all laughed at the ingenuity of the device, and the Captain was just proposing drinks for everyone, when Uhura, pointing

to the edge of the stage, cried out suddenly, " Captain, look! Something's happening there!"

Everyone turned round, and saw with amazement a curious distortion of the lights that seemed to create a wavering effect on the stage. Kirk stared for a second, but when the shimmering lights expanded to form a high column of dancing particles accompanied by a faint but characteristic humming, he quickly realised what was happening, and his reaction was swift and to the point.

"Mr. Johnson!" he shouted. "Over here! On the double. Watch out - somebody is trying to beam in."

The announcement set the rec room astir, and as the Security Chief and his men pushed their way to the platform, Mr. Scott, deserting the buffet, rushed to the Captain.

"But it's impossible, Captain! There's nothing out there to beam from - no planet, no ship, nothing!"

"I know, Scotty. But look at the evidence. Ah... there it goes..." Kirk went on as the column of light faded out. "Whoever was beaming in failed to materialise. Mr. Sulu, will you please check with the bridge?"

While Lt. Sulu was talking over the intercom with the Duty Officer, speculation was running high in the hall, questions and comments going back and forth.

"Captain, could the light effect be an optical illusion?" the Queen of the Night inquired.

"No, Lieutenant, it was the real thing. No doubt about it - was there, Mr. Scott?"

"For sure, it was the beaming effect," the puzzled Engineer replied. "But Captain, I can't understand how..."

"What about a malfunction in the transporter?" broke in McCoy. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Mr. Scott looked hurt. "Nay, Doctor, the transporters are shipshape. We just checked them two days ago. Ask Mr. Kyle."

"Captain," d'Artagnan reported, "neither long range scanners nor sensors have registered anything unusual. On the other hand, a brief upsurge of energy was detected in transporter no. 2 just a minute ago."

The Engineer and the Captain exchanged a startled glance. "Well, Mr. Scott?" asked the latter.

"It can't be anybody from the ship," Scott objected hotly. "It's practically impossible to use the transporter intra-ship, you know that, Captain."

"Are you so sure, Scotty? Don't you think some people we know could do the trick?"

The dour Scot frowned for a few seconds, then a knowing smile slowly dawned on his face. "Aye, Captain, I see what you mean. I know of only one man on board who could do that. But it's risky."



"Exactly!"

"Oh, you mean Mr. Spock, of course," put in Sulu.

"Mr. Spock?" Chekov feared for his mentor's incognito. "Why should he trouble himself with a transporter when all he has to do is take..."

"Captain!" Johnson broke in in a tense whisper. "There is it again!"

By the time the phenomenon materialised again everyone was ready for it. All eyes were on the stage, and the security guards were standing in a circle, ready for any emergency.

The column of dancing lights intensified, the sound hummed like a swarm of angry bees, and a form came into view, translucent at first and then more dense until it finally solidified in the glittering haze and displayed to the spectators a tall dark figure standing quietly in a long black cloak that reached almost to the floor.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and you could have heard a pin drop as the awesome apparition, a symphony in black, was scrutinised by the entire Enterprise crew from the masking helmet to the gloved hands clasped in front of the armour-plated tunic. Then the black phantom stirred, slowly turning its head right and left; at the sight of the grim-looking sailors with phasers at the ready, it raised both hands in a mock gesture of surrender.

Some tentative clapping and laughter sprang up here and there as a natural release of tension, and conversations were resumed.

"Who is that? What is that supposed to be?"

"Why, it's Darth Vader of Star Wars."

"Oh, is that what it is! Doesn't he look frightening!"

"Yes, he's gorgeous, isn't he?"

"But who is it?"

"Don't know. Some say it could be Mr. Spock."

"No, you're kidding! Our First never goes in for fancy dress."

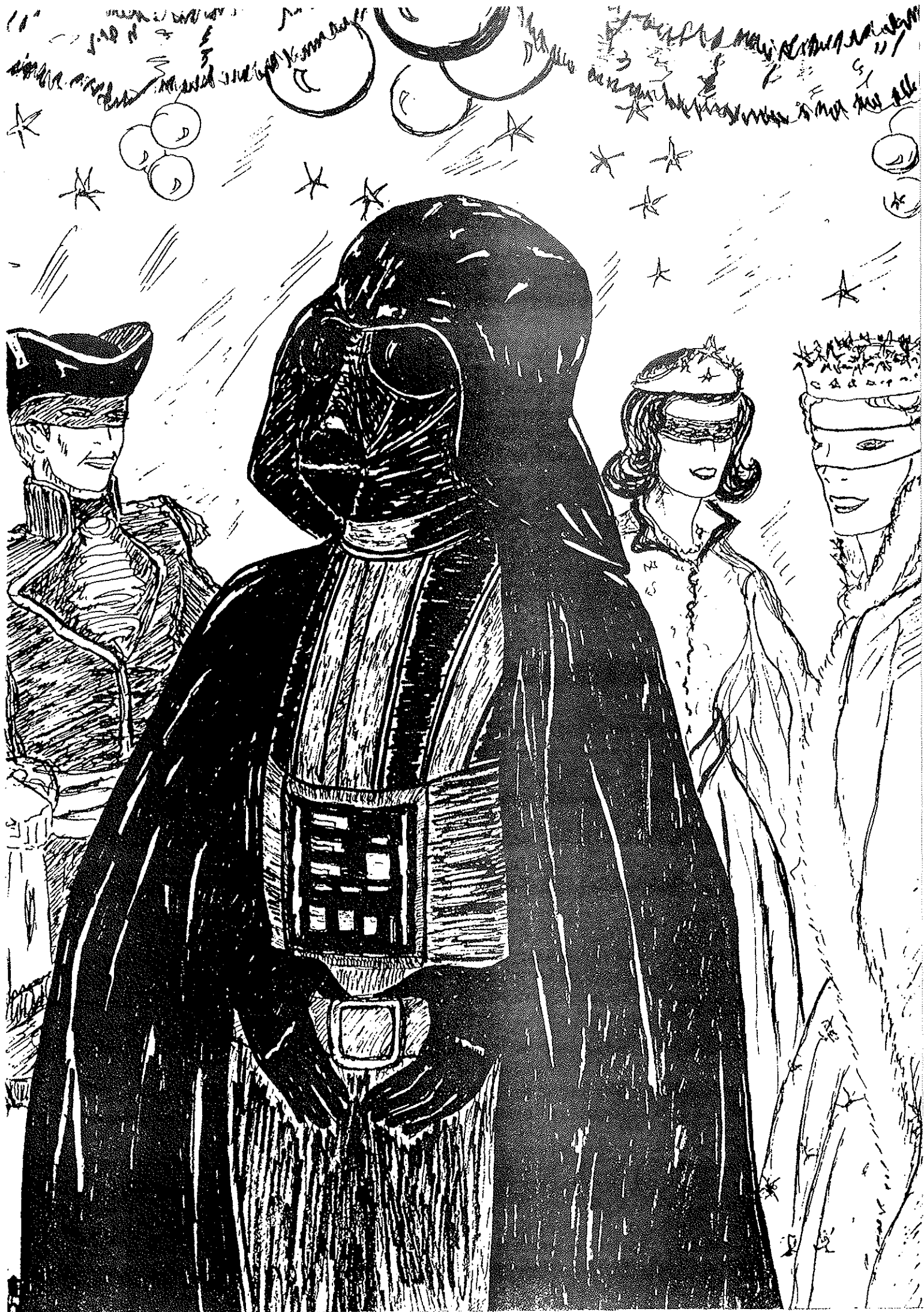
"Could it be Lt. Kyle?"

"No, I tell you. I heard it's Mr. Spock."

While speculation ran through the company, the group on the stage remained stock still for a brief moment. Lt. Johnson, somewhat confused, shot a questioning glance at the Captain.

Kirk, suspecting the true identity of the newcomer, said lightly, "It's all right, Mr. Johnson, stand easy. I don't think our visitor comes with bad intent." Then, addressing the alien, "Welcome to our party, my lord. Won't you come and join us?"

The Dark Lord slowly walked down the platform and along the way made for him by the masqueraders, who were burning with curiosity. When he reached the senior officers, Chekov and Sulu were explaining



to Dr. McCoy the significance of the Darth Vader character in the world of science fiction.

"Jim," the doctor hissed in a stage whisper, "do you think this is Spock?"

"Who knows, Bones? You'd better ask him. As soon as he speaks we'll find out anyway."

The mysterious figure was now standing in front of them.

"We are indeed much honoured by your presence, my lord Vader." the Captain said genially. "May we congratulate you on your splendid costume. Very impressive - really."

Vader made a slight bow, but kept silent.

With a wink at the others, and grinning all over his face, Mr. Scott declared, "I don't know how you did it, but that was a smart trick you engineered with the transporter, Mr. Spock."

The dark-helmeted head turned to Scott, and to their surprise a strange, husky voice came out of the mask. "You are mistaken about my identity, Mr. Scott. I am not Spock."

"Well, now, he's managed to change his voice, too!" declared a disgruntled McCoy.

"If you are not Spock, then who are you?" asked Uhura, who like Christine Chapel seemed fascinated by the mysterious presence behind the mask.

"I am Darth Vader, just as you are the radiant Queen of the Night, and this lady here is the gracious Snow Queen."

Chapel, sensing admiration in the voice and feeling the invisible gaze on her, could not help blushing.

As for Colonel Chekov, he was delighted with the success of his bright idea - a real stroke of genius, he thought - and also happily surprised by the ease with which Mr. Spock seemed to get right inside the part. "Lord Vader," he blurted out, "I... I must tell you that... I think you're wonderful, sir. You look just as I expected."

"Thank you, Colonel. I am glad to have risen to your expectations." Even in that faked voice there could be detected the hint of amusement that often underlay the Vulcan's speech.

This prompted Dr. McCoy to drawl, "Well... if you are not Spock, and in spite of that queer voice of yours, you damn well sound like him, Mr. Vader!"

By that time the Carnival was at its height, and the 'group therapy' seemed fully effective. Already the Enterprise's amateur band had settled onto the stage and were striking up the first bars of a dance tune. Some couples had already taken the floor, and the Master of Ceremonies, at first disconcerted by the dramatic appearance of the unexpected visitor, once again had everything under control.

The Captain's party gathered by the refreshment table, but as drinks were being served and handed around it appeared that the

Doctor had somehow slipped away, and that Darth Vader - probably fascinated by the fantastic variety of fancy dress - was slowly strolling about the room, a silent and enigmatic figure attracting female attention.

"Just look at him, Uhura," Penny Palmer said quietly. "Isn't he marvellous? He looks so weird, he gives me the creeps."

"How come you girls always seem to be attracted by mysterious dark strangers?" d'Artagnan enquired at large. "What about us? It's not fair!"

"But we love you, Sulu!" Uhura laughed. "It's not the same thing. You don't understand."

"What I can't understand is how Mr. Spock ever got into that fancy dress. He usually hates that sort of thing."

"And what I can't understand," put in Chekov, "is how you can be so sure it's Mr. Spock."

"Really, Pavel, just look at him!" Uhura explained. "Who else has that sort of poise, that style? What do you think, Captain? But you must know, of course."

"I know nothing at all, believe me!" Kirk replied, laughing. "But as Spock would say, the odds are that..."

"Don't bother with the odds, Jim." McCoy reappeared suddenly. "I have a sure way of finding out if he's a Vulcan or not!" And with a wicked chuckle he whipped a medi-scanner and tricorder out of the large pocket of his frock coat. "This is going to expose our Vulcan for good, believe me."

There was a concert of laughter and protest.

"That's not fair, Doctor," Nurse Chapel objected. "You can't do that."

"No? Just you watch!"

As Darth Vader was quietly passing by, heading for the doors, he was hailed by McCoy. "I say, Mr. Vader, a word with you, please."

The Dark Lord approached, and on being offered a drink by Scott, declined silently with a shake of the head. Then, hearing a familiar whirring sound behind him, he slowly turned around to find the doctor holding his scanner.

"With your permission," McCoy said glibly, "I want to check something."

"By all means," replied the husky voice, loaded with irony.

The onlookers watched breathlessly as the doctor waved his scanner in front of Vader's chest, checking the readings on the tiny screen of the tricorder. His victim seemed perfectly unconcerned, and stood still as a rock. It soon appeared, however, that all was not as they expected, for McCoy was peering frowningly at the screen, shaking the scanner and muttering, "Impossible... it's just impossible..."

"What's impossible, Bones?" Kirk inquired. "Come on - what's wrong?"

"Everything, Jim!" the doctor burst out at last. "These readings mean nothing at all. I've checked and rechecked. I've never seen such a physiology - it's not Vulcan, not Human, nor anything we know. It's completely, utterly alien!"

Then, only then, the Dark Lord stirred. "Doctor McCoy," he said solemnly, "how very Human you are. You have ears to hear, but you do not listen; you have eyes to see, but you do not observe. Let this be a lesson to you. In future, try and believe what you are told." And with those words Darth Vader wrapped himself in his black cloak and stalked out of the hall, leaving the doctor baffled by his failure.

"Well, Bones, you must concede that you've been had this time." The Captain could not help laughing at the doctor's disappointment.

"Dammit, Jim, I've no idea how he did it, I admit, but mark my words, I'll find out!"

Suddenly the intercom whistle cut through the merry hubbub of the hall and a voice called, "Bridge to Captain Kirk. Bridge to Captain Kirk."

The Captain set his glass down on a nearby table and went to the nearest intercom. "Kirk here."

"Priority call from Starfleet, Captain."

"Oh, and what do they want?"

"Admiral Van Rosenboom wants to speak to you and Mr. Spock personally."

"I'm on my way. Oh, will you notify Mr. Spock. Kirk out."

"Aye, Captain."

"Sorry, folks, duty calls. I have to go to the bridge. Carry on."

"What do they want, Captain?" Scott asked curiously. "I hope it's not another of their special missions."

"I have no idea, Scotty, but I hope not."

On his way out Kirk glanced around the hall, but the tall figure of Vader was nowhere to be seen. With a wry smile he hurried along the corridor, hearing the shipwide call, "Mr. Spock, report to the bridge."

As the turbolift was taking him up the Captain relaxed, and leaning against the bulkhead removed his hat and mask, sighing heavily. The turbolift stopped, the doors parted smoothly, and a cloaked and helmeted figure entered - Darth Vader.

"Ah-ha!" said the Captain, fanning himself with his hat. "I knew that call from Starfleet would bring my First Officer out of hiding. Didn't it, Mr. Spock - or should I call you Vader?"



The mysterious being removed his gloves and slipped a hand under his black helmet. There was a faint click, then the deep familiar voice replied, "Spock will do, Captain. The masquerade is over."

"It was perfect, Spock, and so unexpected. Even now, if it were not for your voice and your hands, which are unmistakable, I would still be in doubt. You had them all fooled down there."

"Not all, Jim. Mr. Chekov knew about it."

"Chekov? How come?"

"The Vader character was his idea. He seems to be a science fiction addict."

"Is that so? Very resourceful, our Mr. Chekov. Ah, here we are. I wonder what old Van Rosenboom has in store for us."

As the turbolift doors parted the skeleton crew on duty looked round and gaped at the sight of the Captain in smart coat and breeches, followed by an awesome black figure.

"All right, Mr. Farman," Kirk said briskly, stepping down to the command chair. "Anything to report?"

"Nothing, sir, except the call from Starfleet," the Lieutenant replied, standing up.

"Good. Put it through, Ensign, on audio."

"Yes, sir," the young Ensign replied nervously, turning back to her console. The tall figure of Darth Vader, standing close by, had set her in a flutter, and as she fumbled for the switches she inadvertently pressed the wrong one. The main viewscreen sprang to life, and the Admiral's face appeared.

"Damn! And me in fancy dress!" muttered the Captain. "That's all we need!"

"Sorry, sir," Uhura's relief gasped in dismay. "My mistake. Shall I...?"

"Never mind, it's too late now. Kirk here, Admiral. What can we do for you?"

A brief pause ensued. Admiral Van Rosenboom, a picture of blank astonishment, was staring at the incredible sight in the command chair. But, experienced in dealing with all possible contingencies, he quickly recovered his poise. Clearing his throat he said, "Er... is that you, Kirk? What's the meaning of this pantomime? What the devil are you doing in that rig-out?"

"This rig-out, Admiral, is my fancy dress. I represent Captain Hornblower. Let me explain. You may not be aware, sir, that this is the time of Mardi-Gras, so we thought of a Carnival to celebrate the end of our mission, and to give the crew a well-deserved entertainment as recommended by our Chief Medical Officer after the severe strain of the last four months. I trust you have no objection, Admiral?" Kirk's smile was a model of innocence and diplomacy.

"No... No, of course not." Van Rosenboom was both mystified

and intrigued. "A Carnival is actually quite a good idea, Kirk, to boost morale on deep space Starships." The Admiral chuckled. "Well," he went on more seriously, "I have good news for you and your crew. You can tell them from me that as soon as you reach Starbase 10 the Enterprise is to dock for a complete overhaul, and after debriefing you all have a month's leave before your next mission."

"Wonderful!" Kirk breathed with relief, feeling the excitement on the bridge at the news. "Thank you, Admiral. We all need it. But this leave won't be cancelled for a last-minute assignment, I hope? You understand, it's happened so often before."

"Not this time, Kirk, I give you my word. You'll have your R&R. However, the reason I called you personally is that I have to give special instructions to Commander Spock. He is with you, isn't he? I don't see him."

"He's right here behind me," Kirk said laughing, glancing up to where Darth Vader stood on the upper bridge, stiff with confusion. "Come down, Mr. Vader - you're wanted!"

"Please, Captain, I would rather not. I can hear what the Admiral has to say perfectly well from here."

"What's that? What did he say?" Van Rosenboom asked. "I want to see him. Why doesn't he show himself, Kirk? Is he in fancy dress too?"

"He sure is, Admiral. Come on, Mr. Spock, don't be shy." Kirk, rather unfeelingly, beckoned Spock forward.

Slowly, reluctantly, Darth Vader came down to stand beside the Captain, who was watching the Admiral's reaction with mischievous anticipation. As he told McCoy afterwards, "I've never seen anyone so flabbergasted. He was really pop-eyed."

"Good lord! What's this? What is that supposed to be?" The Admiral's aide, hovering by his side, whispered in his ear. "Oh, I see. That's what it is. Star Wars, you say? I'm afraid I've never been very keen on this science fiction tomfoolery. Well, Mr. Spock... if you are Spock, really. How can we tell?"

Feeling himself cornered and forsaken even by his trusted friend, the Dark Lord carefully removed his mask and helmet, revealing the features of a rather hot and dishevelled Vulcan, quite green at the tips of his ears. Even in this unforeseen predicament Spock managed to maintain his customary dignity, and standing stiffly to attention said, "Reporting for duty, Admiral."

"At ease, Commander," Van Rosenboom said kindly. "Though I never thought a Vulcan would join in a carnival. I must say I am impressed by your outfit. Congratulations to both of you."

"Thank you, Admiral."

"Now to come to the point, I have news for you, Spock. You are to spend your shore leave on Vulcan with your parents."

Surprised, Kirk shot a sidelong glance at his First Officer, watching for a reaction to the unexpected statement. His feelings carefully masked behind an impassive face, eyebrow slightly raised, the Vulcan coolly inquired, "Is that an order, Admiral?"

"Not quite, Commander. At the base you will receive a formal invitation from your father, Ambassador Sarek, to spend your leave at home. But you are also entrusted with a special mission. The Science Academy and the High Council of Vulcan have applied to Starfleet for our most qualified Science Officer to give a series of lectures on our latest scientific achievements. I can say no more about it. You will report to Commodore Ramsay immediately on arrival at the base; there you will be given particulars of the mission, and you will proceed to Vulcan without delay. That way you will combine both duty and vacation. Is that clear, Mr. Spock?"

"Perfectly, Admiral."

"Good, that's settled. Kirk," the Admiral turned his attention back to the Captain, "I don't want to keep you away from your festivities, but tell me, how long does a Carnival last, generally?"

"There aren't any strict rules, I believe. On the Enterprise it will last three days - and three nights."

"Lucky fellows! By the way, whose idea was it to make use of this Carnival affair for therapeutic purposes? Yours, I imagine?"

"Not at all, Admiral. Actually, it was Spock's bright idea."

"Well I'll be damned! Mr. Spock, indeed." Van Rosenboom stared unbelievably at the First Officer standing quietly by the Captain's chair. Then, shaking his head, he glanced at his assistants. "I think, gentlemen, that from this day our preconceptions of Vulcans should be revised."

"I don't think you should, Admiral," Kirk objected. "Our resident Vulcan always has very logical reasons for his actions, however outrageous they may seem sometimes. Haven't you, Mr. Spock?" The mischievous glance he directed at his friend was received with perfect equanimity.

"I'm sure he has," the Admiral chuckled. "All right, Kirk, carry on - but don't overdo it. Rosenboom out."

As the screen went blank the Captain rose to his feet. "Well, that's that. Shore leave at last. I've never seen the Admiral in such a good mood, though."

"No indeed. I didn't even know he had a sense of humour," said a familiar voice behind him, and Dr. McCoy stepped from the turbolift where he had been waiting unobtrusively.

"Oh, you're here, Bones. You heard the news?"

"I did. R&R for the crew, and a lecture tour for Spock. What fun! But Jim, you two gave old Rosebud quite a turn. I really enjoyed watching him. He looked completely bowled over."

"Doctor, let me remind you that the Admiral's name is Van Rosenboom, the translation being rose bush, not rosebud," Mr. Spock said disapprovingly.

"Dammit, Spock, don't you take that lecturing tone with me! Especially after making an exhibition of yourself in front of the Admiral. Do you realise, you overgrown pixie, that now your reputation is utterly blasted in Starfleet?"



"I am well aware of the fact, Doctor," the unperturbed Vulcan replied, removing his black cloak and folding it neatly on the back of a chair.

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it..." McCoy was disappointed by the lack of reaction to his banter. He turned to the Captain with a shrug. "Come on, Jim, let's go. You should make an announcement to the crew. They've heard about the priority call, you know. This will put the icing on the cake."

"Just a minute, Bones." Kirk was checking the course with the Helmsman, and granting leave to the Navigator and Communications Officer. "Just link your controls to the Helm console, then go and enjoy yourselves." He looked enquiringly at the Vulcan. "Aren't you coming, Spock?"

"No, Captain. With your permission I would rather stay on the bridge. I have had quite sufficient experience of carnivals and festivities."

"I quite believe it," Kirk agreed, knowing how painful noisy social gatherings were to his friend. "Okay then. Mr. Farman, you can leave too. Mr. Spock will take over. If there is anything, you know where to find me, Spock."

"Yes, Captain."

The merry party piled into the turbolift, and the Vulcan was left alone with the Helmsman. With a sigh he unfastened the light sabre from his belt and set it down in a neat pile with the helmet and cloak, the derisory trappings of a ludicrous masquerade. All things considered, however, a gratifying result had come out of it: the good doctor had been duly mystified.

After a glance at the Helm console, and a few words with the young Helmsman, Spock sat thankfully in the command chair, welcoming the quietness and silence of the bridge. For a few minutes he called on Vulcan disciplines to restore his mental shields, which had been badly assaulted by the flow of unbridled emotions and excitements. That done, he quietly began to examine the events of the last few hours. He quickly dismissed the memories of some disturbing moments to focus his thoughts on future events, in particular on the voyage he was to make to Vulcan, his home planet.

Because of a painful disagreement with his father he had not been there for almost twenty years. Fortunately the misunderstanding had finally been settled during the fateful journey to Babel, and now he was called back home.

He wondered about the special mission to Vulcan, important enough to call for a priority message from no less than a Starfleet Admiral. Obviously this series of lectures he was supposed to deliver was a cover for some secret mission, but speculation without data was useless, therefore illogical, so he dismissed the matter from his mind until their arrival at Starbase 10.

Spock now felt relaxed and contented. Thanks to his Vulcan ability to deal with several subjects at once, one part of his brain remained on alert, steadily monitoring the screens and consoles on the bridge, while his inner thoughts were allowed to drift along more pleasant channels. As he had so often done since leaving Vulcan he recalled the family estate at ShiKahr, his home town; the big stone mansion in the walled garden; his lovely mother, tending

her roses; the imposing figure of his father. And masses of odours, sensations, colours... The red and purple sky at sunset... The stifling heat of the desert... So many happy memories crowded in on his mind that, unwillingly, he was seized by an overwhelming, bitter-sweet homesickness.

For a long time he remained lost in thought and undisturbed, for the ensign at the Helm, used to the Vulcan's silent ways, respected his meditation. Once, however, slightly uneasy with such total stillness behind him, the ensign peeped round to check whether Mr. Spock was awake or taking a nap, and found himself blushing when he faced a quizzically tilted eyebrow and a pair of watchful dark eyes. Mr. Spock was indeed wide awake.

This peaceful situation was not to last long. Spock was mentally roaming about the red sand dunes of Vulcan's Forge when he was abruptly brought back to the bridge of the Enterprise by a beep at his elbow. He flicked open the channel. "Spock here."

"Oh, Spock," said the Captain's voice against a background of dance music and laughter, "are you ready for a visit up there?"

"A visit, Captain?" he asked, puzzled.

"Yes, Mr. Darth Vader. A delegation of VIPs to give you the award you won in the fancy dress competition." Kirk sounded particularly cheerful, and his First Officer shuddered with misgivings.

"Really, Captain, I don't think that..."

"Tut tut, Mr. Spock," the Captain broke in, "you can't decline such a beautiful prize. It's too late anyway - they're on their way. Kirk out."

Spock was left waiting, and he hastily built up a safeguard of mental screens against the inevitable onslaught of emotions he was to meet again.

Sure enough after a few moments the turbolift doors parted, revealing a group of merry characters including a dashing musketeer, a cossack, and two ravishing queens with their ladies-in-waiting, all of them coming to stand around the command chair and the Helmsman, who was delighted with this unexpected diversion.

As the First Officer rose slowly to his feet the lift doors opened once again, revealing Captain Hornblower, the Scottish Chieftain, and the Country Doctor, each one loaded with glasses and bottles.

"You see, Mr. Spock," Uhura explained sweetly, "since you won't come down to us, we have to come up to you."

"Quite right, Uhura," Kirk agreed, setting the glasses on the nearby consoles. "We can't leave you out of the highlight of the party, Spock."

"And," McCoy added, "you must drink with us to the success of the Carnival therapy you prescribed - shamelessly encroaching on my preserves, Mr. Spock."

With much laughing and excitement the corks popped, and Scott hurriedly filled the glasses with a sparkling amber-coloured

liquid. Chekov and Sulu, acting as waiters, handed the glasses round.

Mr. Spock demurred as usual, but Kirk insisted, "You must make an exception, Spock. This is champagne, a special drink for a special occasion."

"As you wish, Captain. Just half a glass please, Mr. Chekov."

"I don't know where this one comes from, Mr. Spock, but it tastes almost as good as the champagne they make in the Crimea, which is the best, of course."

"I am sorry to disillusion you, Mr. Chekov, but the sparkling beverage produced in Russia is not champagne. Champagne is a trade mark, and only wine made with the grapes of the Champagne country in France can be sold under that label."

"But... but I always heard that champagne was invented in Russia!"

"An error, Mr. Chekov. The secret of its fabrication was found by a French monk, whose name was Dom Perignon, if I remember rightly."

"I say, Spock," drawled the doctor, "for a teetotaler you are remarkably well informed about the making of wine."

"As a scientist, Doctor..." Spock began.

"Not now, you two," Kirk said to his friends. "This is neither the time nor the place for one of your arguments. Ready, everyone? Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

"Prosit!"

"Your health!"

"Skal!"

"A votre sante!"

The toasts echoed around the bridge as the company raised their glasses. Then after an appreciative pause to savour the taste Mr. Scott smacked his lips and declared, "Not bad, really, though a wee bit on the sweet side for my taste. What do you make of it, Mr. Spock, since you're the expert on champagne?"

"You are quite right, Mr. Scott. This is a demi-sec variety. Actually, gourmets prefer champagne brut, with no added sugar," the Vulcan stated, to the surprise of his fellow officers.

"Why Mr. Spock," Sulu said, "you do know a lot about champagne. I always thought that Vulcans never drink."

"They do not as a rule, Lieutenant, but in the house of an ambassador, where guests from all over the galaxy are entertained, logically there must be exceptions."

"Well I declare! Now we know your guilty secret, Spock. You were 'logically' guzzling champagne on the sly when you were a

boy." McCoy's eyes were brimming with mischief.

"Oh, Doctor!" Christine Chapel was shocked. "How can you?"

The Vulcan, not at all embarrassed by the laughter, quietly gazed at the Doctor, a twinkle in his brown eyes. "It is common knowledge, Miss Chapel, that alcohol has no effect whatsoever on the Vulcan metabolism, and that champagne is 68.35% less noxious to the health than mint julep."

This rejoinder brought another burst of laughter, and McCoy's traditional retort, "You pointy-eared, computerised so-and-so..."

The Captain decided then that he had better come to the point. "All right, folks," he said in his command voice, "we've not come here just to drink, but to give our Dark Lord here his prize for his fancy dress. Ladies, will you...?"

Uhura and Christine Chapel exchanged a knowing smile, then out of a large bag produced a big brown teddy bear - but a bear with a difference. Someone had fixed white fangs to its mouth, had tied a lovely blue ribbon bow around its neck, and had sewn to its furry chest the insignia of the Science Department. It was, in fact, a teddy sehlat.

Under the watchful eyes of the bridge crew the Queen of Night presented the animal to the First Officer. "Mr. Spock, sometimes called Darth Vader," she said solemnly, "on behalf of the Carnival Committee and the Enterprise crew, I am pleased to award you this sehlat for winning first prize in the fancy dress competition, science fiction category, with our congratulations and compliments."

The confused Vulcan found himself holding a glass of champagne in one hand and the sehlat in the other.

Kirk, to give his friend time to recover his poise, declared over the clapping and cheering, "This certainly calls for another round of drinks. What about it, Mr. Scott? Is there any champagne left?"

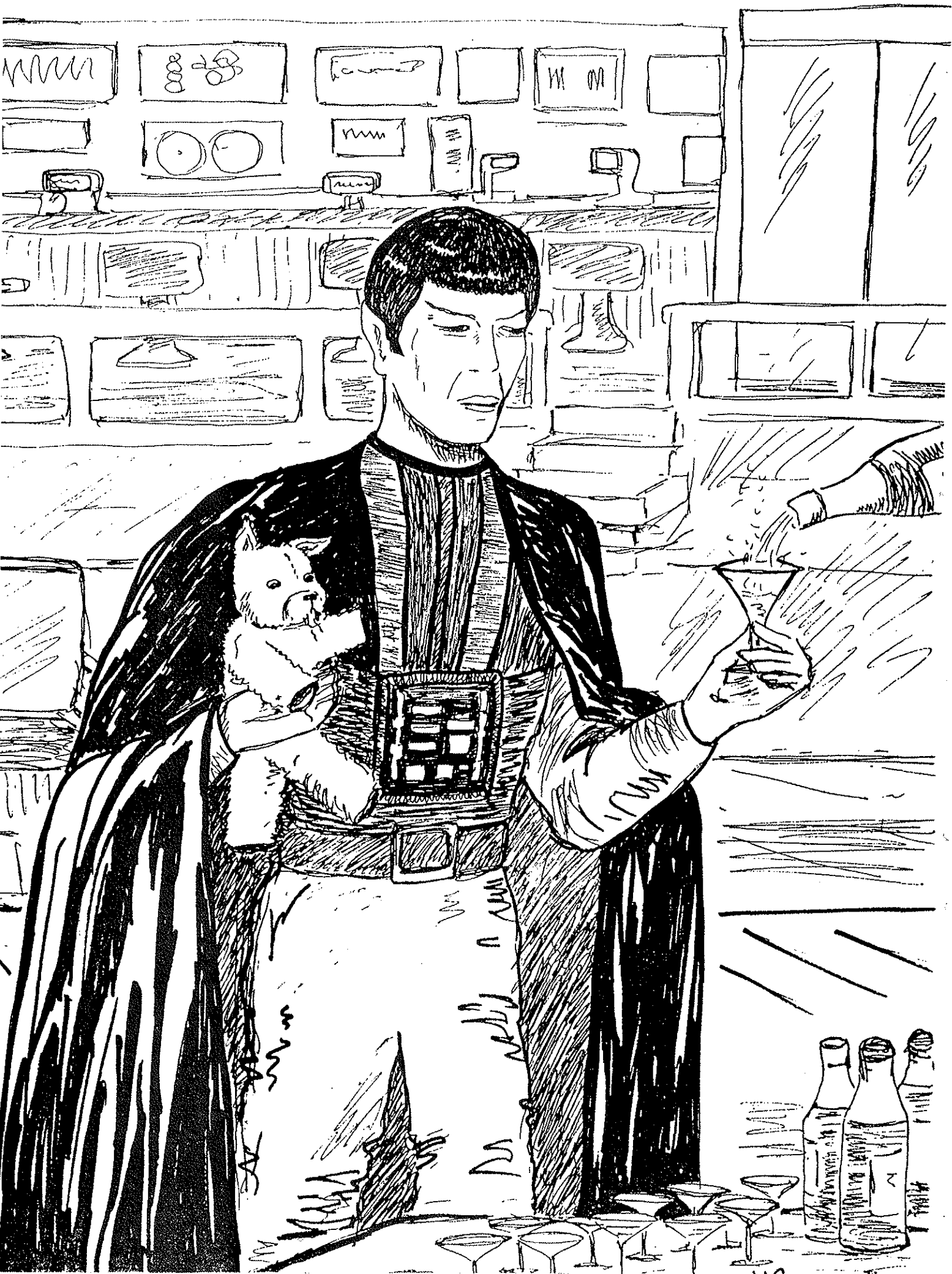
"Aye, Captain, we've two more bottles to crack!" replied the Engineer, who was slightly tipsy already. "There you are, Captain... More champagne, Doctor? And you, lassies... come on, it's good for your health! Mr. Spock, just a wee drop... And you, laddies? No need to ask, of course!"

Once all the glasses had been refilled the Captain raised his own. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, a toast. To the charming queens and ladies who graced our party and manufactured this remarkable sehlat with their own hands; to the team who made this Carnival successful; to the winners of the competitions; and last but not least, to Mr. Spock for having played the game so well!"

"Hear hear! Bravo!" cried everyone.

The First Officer, having carefully settled his sehlat in the command chair and rather self-consciously cleared his throat, said, "I am much obliged, Captain. Now allow me for once to join in this illogical custom of wishing good health while imbibing highly noxious liquids."

"Go on, Spock!" called the Doctor.



"I raise my glass to the Enterprise, to my fellow officers, to Miss Uhura and Miss Chapel for making my sehlat, to Mr. Chekov, who made it possible with his suggestion..."

"You're blushing, Pavel!"

"... to Dr. McCoy, who urged me into it with his ceaseless badgering and nagging..."

There were roars of laughter.

"... and last but not least, to our Captain. To you, Jim."

Under cover of the clapping the two friends, so dissimilar and yet so close, exchanged one of their special confidential glances. "Thank you, Spock," Kirk said softly with a smile.

Mr. Scott, in a jolly mood by now, was impressed and said so. "I didn't know our First was such a orator. That was the best speech I've heard for a long time. But tell me, Spock, I'm curious... How exactly did you manage that voice of Vader's? Some kind of synthesiser, I'd guess."

"Something similar, Mr. Scott. I fitted a computerised device into the mask, which altered my voice."

"Ah. That's clever. You'll have to show me the helmet and the light sabre when you have a moment, so I can see how it works. And that trick you did with the transporter - that was something! You gave us quite a turn."

"Actually, that was not what I meant to do, Mr. Scott. I wished to beam quietly into the corridor outside the door, but due to unforeseen magnetic interference I was prevented from doing so."

"In other words," put in McCoy, "you bungled it! But since we're on that topic, I want to know how you managed to change your metabolic readings on my scanner. You didn't tamper with it, did you?"

"Certainly not, Doctor!" Spock replied, a picture of righteousness. "But you do not seem to know that Vulcans are able to alter their physiology at will when necessary," he added impassively.

McCoy stared. "What? That's a new one! You can't fool me - it's impossible. Come on, Spock, tell me - how did you do it?"

"Impossible, Doctor," Spock replied at his most Vulcan. "The disclosure of this singular power would be improper, and most illogical."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" McCoy asked suspiciously.

"Really, Doctor, you cannot expect me to give away something which might be an invaluable safeguard in critical circumstances - for instance, your repeated and untimely summonses for me to go to sickbay to undergo medical examinations."

McCoy was left speechless by the argument. Looking around for support, and seeing his friends helpless with laughter, the doctor realised that what he had suspected all along was right - that damned Vulcan was solemnly and unquestionably pulling his leg. The

teasing sparkle at the back of the dark eyes could not be mistaken, and left no doubt about the fact. Enraged and tickled all at once, McCoy groped for a stinging retort.

"Oh! You... you...!" he spluttered.

"Interesting," Mr. Spock commented coolly. "It seems, Doctor, that for once words fail you."

"Damn you, Spock!" was all McCoy could find to say.

"Now, now, gentlemen." The Captain wiped away tears of laughter. "Let's have a truce. And Mr. Spock, for pity's sake, do tell us! Don't you see that McCoy is on the verge of apoplexy, and that we're all dying of curiosity?"

"Indeed, Captain?" Spock was all innocence. "Very well, since you insist. It is very simple. I fixed a miniature device here, in the breastplate of my tunic. When activated it produces a kind of force field, and neutralises, for example, interfering electromagnetic radiations."

"Ah!" Mr. Scott exclaimed, "That's very clever, Mr. Spock. Something like our life-support belts, I suppose?"

"Exactly, Mr. Scott. It is of course based on the same principle, but it is adapted to..." and the two men launched themselves into a highly technical discussion which, after a few minutes, was cut short without compunction by the Captain.

"Very interesting, gentlemen, but I think you should keep this conversation for the Physics Laboratory. So now, Bones, you have your answer, haven't you? You know now how Spock did it?"

"If you mean, do I understand how he managed to scramble the readings of my tricorder, I'll say no. I'm a doctor, dammit, not an engineer, and all this high-falutin' technical parlance is beyond me. But let me tell you what I have just found out, Jim." McCoy paused to make sure he had everyone's attention. "I have found out that there is something more maddening than a logical Vulcan, and that is a teasing Vulcan with a sense of humour."

Roars of laughter answered him.

"And that is to be taken as a compliment, Spock," Kirk chuckled. "All right, I think we've had just about enough fun for now; we'd better go and leave the night shift in peace. And don't forget that duty calls in... about five hours."

"Five hours, 20.48 minutes, Captain."

"Ah yes, Mr. Spock, thank you. Still minding the shop, aren't you? Very well, we'd better go. Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Captain, and thank you for the party."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mr. Spock."

"Goodnight."

Everyone was leaving, gathering glasses and empty bottles and

making for the turbolift. The Captain, the Doctor, and the Engineer had already left, heading for Scott's quarters for "a wee nightcap." Uhura and Sulu, waiting for the lift, watched with amusement as the First Officer quietly picked up his sehlat from the command chair and sat in its place.

"Goodnight, Mr. Spock. Coming, Pavel?"

"Yes, just a minute. Mr. Spock, I'd like to ask you... About that Vulcan power you have... I don't quite understand - it's not true, is it?"

"No, Mr. Chekov. I am sorry to disappoint you, but it is not."

"So," Chekov beamed, "it was just a joke, wasn't it, for Dr. McCoy?"

"Vulcans never joke, Mr. Chekov," was the inevitable answer.

"Of course they don't, Mr. Spock. We know that!" Uhura, Sulu and Chekov intoned together before entering the lift with their last sight of their senior officer sitting gravely in the Captain's chair, his teddy sehlat poised on his knee.

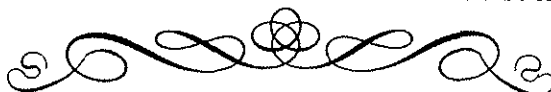


## UHURA'S WISH

I wish only for the freedom to continue,  
For this life of exploration to expand.  
To grow from my experiences, to learn  
from those I'm with - and mayhap, to teach,  
to share, to learn. To help.

At this time my wishes are fulfilled.  
My final wish? Keep us together.  
For apart I fear for such as we.  
Spock - who in this safe environment  
Has reached out and has been heard,  
has found as I have a haven  
in an unpalatable universe.  
It will not last, I know, for life  
passes on, leaving in its wake  
past contentments.  
Yet I pray - may this last  
a little while longer. And not just for my own sake.  
Keep us together...

Susan P. Keighley





# POINT WELL TAKEN

by

Karina Lumbert

Sulu leaned back in the navigator's chair and grinned, thinking of the Enterprise streaking along the Romulan Neutral Zone at hyperwarp 5, the equivalent to warp 25. It had taken him a while to get used to the fact that they were moving nearly three times faster than the Enterprise's fastest speed, but now that he had the thought gave him a slight power rush. His grin widened as he again pictured Scott's shocked expression.

"This ship wasna' built for that kind of stress!" he had protested heartily. "It'll tear her in two!"

"Calm yourself, Scotty," T'Kien had said good-naturedly. "We're covering the same distance that we would at warp 25, but we're not moving at that velocity. In essence, the hyperwarp drive propels us into a subdimension of space, a 'fold' where the points are closer together. With special programming the sensors can scan the normal dimension, but the normal dimension won't be aware of us. It's a far superior cloaking device, which is what Starfleet wanted for the Neutral Zone." Then she had smiled. "I promise ye, lad, that I'd never do anything to hurt yer wee bairns," she had said, and Scott couldn't help but smile in return.

T'Kien, a new addition to the Enterprise, had proved to Sulu once again that you couldn't judge by appearances. Although a Vulcan, she had ways to charm any being she encountered - enough even to convince Scott to entrust her with his 'bairns'. She proclaimed herself a jack-of-all-trades who was currently interested in engineering.

Sulu laughed in spite of himself. Some interest! Once Starfleet had got hold of her they had rushed her through the Academy and immediately made her Assistant Chief Engineer because she *designed* the hyperwarp system. Yet no-one seemed to resent her rapid promotion, for they were all familiar with Vulcan intelligence; and again, she did have grace.

Kirk had once told her that, and to everyone's surprise she had laughed.

"I seem to get along with everyone except my own people," she had said.

She was, she had explained to the officers, a radical among Vulcans because she believed that it was illogical and inefficient for Vulcans to deny the emotions they worked so hard to suppress.

"Of course, I would never go to Human extremes - unless logic warranted it - but controlled emotional expression is quite beneficial."

To learn this control she had joined an acting troupe, and had done everything from free drama to dancing to comedy. "It was a

fascinating experience, but when the director wanted to clip my ears I knew it was time to move on," she had said with a wink.

Yet despite her radical beliefs she was as perfectly logical and rational as any Vulcan.

"Which is why I can't get along with them," she had remarked. "I annoy them, and it makes them uncomfortable."

Well, Sulu thought, *she hasn't been annoying Spock*. Rumours of romance between them ran wild, and Sulu hoped they were true. If anyone could help Spock come to terms with his Human side, she could.

Another rumour spreading was that in her 'wild theatrical days', T'Kien could drink any life form under the table. This rumour seemed to be true, for Scott was dying for her to prove she could still do it, and T'Kien was trying to convince Spock that it was logical to develop such a skill...

Sulu snapped out of his reverie as he was thrown forward.

"Mr. Sulu, report!" Captain Kirk ordered as he picked himself up off the floor.

Sulu checked the console, eyes widening. "Sir, we've gone from hyperwarp 5 to impulse!"

"Are we in the Neutral Zone?"

"No, sir," Chekov's characteristic Russian burr answered. "We are on our side of the Zone. We are just crawling now," he added quietly.

"Explanation?"

Sulu shrugged. "It's not from navigation, sir."

Kirk thumbed the intercom on the command chair. "Engineering... Scotty, report."

"Engineer's Mate Wilson, sir," a voice responded. In the background they could hear the crackling of machinery, T'Kien's calm orders, and Scott's curses and groans. "Sir, the hyperwarp drive just went off line."

Kirk sighed - he'd figured that much. "Why?" he demanded.

"It just... did, sir. I... Hold on." After a moment Wilson returned. "Sir, Commander T'Kien says the shutdown might have been caused by Neubaum particles. She requests that Mr. Spock scan for them."

Kirk turned to Spock, who had turned from his console. "It will take time to set the scanners for something so rare," the Vulcan said.

"All right, get working on it. I want full reports in one hour. Mr. Sulu, do we have warp power?"

"Aye, sir."

"Ahead warp factor two."

"Aye aye, Captain," Sulu responded, thinking ruefully that this was going to be one of those missions.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 5748.5.

"Damage to the hyperwarp drive has been repaired, but we cannot use it due to the high concentration of Neubaum particles in the area. Neubaum particles, produced by splitting quarks, have only been recorded during ion storms, and then in such low quantities that they create only mild inefficiencies in the hyperwarp drive. They are obviously being created artificially. The question is, by whom? And why?

"Two sources of Neubaum particles have been located within the Neutral Zone. One is on Ogilac IV; since sensors are unable to scan the area, we will beam down to investigate. The other source is orbiting the planet. It too eludes our sensors, so the Enterprise will orbit with the planet between it and us, just in case."

"Everyone ready?" Kirk asked as they entered the transporter room.

"I'm a doctor..." McCoy started, but was interrupted by two rueful "Indeed"s. He turned to glare at the Vulcans. Spock was innocently checking his equipment, but T'Kien arched a brow and winked. Mollified, he turned back to Kirk.

"Why do I have to carry this phaser?" he complained for the umpteenth time. "What do you expect to find down there?"

Kirk stepped up to the platform. "Always expect the unexpected, Bones," he replied, and nodded as Lt. Kyle confirmed the coordinates that would set them down several hundred yards from the disturbance. He glanced at the landing party: the Security team; a grumbling McCoy; Spock; and T'Kien, who held her communicator open so that with a single movement of her graceful fingers she could contact the ship. He gave her a questioning glance.

"'Always expect the unexpected'," she quoted.

Kirk smiled. "Energise."

The six people became columns of pure energy and disappeared...

... and reappeared in the middle of a Romulan base camp.

T'Kien wasted no time. Before the Romulans could react she had contacted the ship. "Red alert, Scotty!" she ordered, ignoring the chain of command. "Beam us u..." Her words were cut off as a phaser stunned her. She fell to the ground, the communicator falling from her hand.

"Quick! Get them out of range!" a voice commanded.

The Romulans took the communicators, throwing them in a pile with T'Kien's, and rushed the Enterprise team away from the area. Kirk and the others fought to keep their position, but only the

Security team was caught in the beam. The rest were trapped at the mercy of the Romulans.

The Base Commander strode across the compound and approached the prisoners. "Well, well. Captain James T. Kirk," he said with a grin that was more like a sneer. "What a pleasant - and unexpected - surprise. Where is your ship, Captain?"

Kirk didn't answer, but he was pleased to know the Romulans hadn't located it.

"Well, never mind, we'll find it soon enough. I am Base Commander Kurak. Welcome to my base. I do hope your stay here will be pleasant; you won't be leaving for quite some time." He smirked, and the Romulans around him chuckled, although uncomfortably. One laughed outright at his commander's little joke, and Kurak glared at him before looking over the prisoners.

"You are Spock," he said to the Vulcan, "loyal First Officer of the Enterprise."

Spock nodded once.

"And you?" he asked the Doctor.

"McCoy, Leonard. Chief Medical Officer."

"A prestigious landing party," Kurak commented. "Quite a prize for one day's work. And the best prize of all..." He stared hungrily at T'Kien, who lay unconscious in a guard's arms. "Who is this?"

"None of your business," Kirk replied tightly.

Kurak chuckled at Kirk's reaction, then sobered. "Who stunned her?" he demanded.

"I did, sir!" The guard who had laughed stepped forward proudly, and found himself on the ground, his jaw stinging.

"Fool! If she is harmed, you die." The Commander took T'Kien. "Bring them," he ordered, carrying T'Kien to a holding cell. The smile on his face made Kirk's blood run cold, although Spock seemed as placid as ever.

*How can he take this so calmly?* Kirk wondered.

Commander Kurak gently laid T'Kien on the floor of the holding cell, then shoved the others in. "Bring the female when she regains consciousness - and see that she is not harmed," he told the guard he had reprimanded.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental.

"It is now dusk on Ogilac IV. We have been prisoners for several hours. T'Kien regained consciousness, and a guard took her to Commander Kurak. We can only guess what he intends for her."

Kirk glanced at Spock, who sat with his back against the wall, eyes shut, concentrating. Although his face remained impassive, the

force of his concentration showed clearly to his friend.

*This is hard on him*, Kirk thought, picturing again how T'Kien and Spock had stood for a moment before they took her, their hands touching each other's faces, whispering softly in Vulcan. The guards, amused, had allowed this farewell.

Kirk had heard the rumours of their romance, but hadn't believed them to be true.

He had also heard rumours of what Romulans did to Vulcans.

McCoy must have been thinking along the same lines, for he slammed his hand against the wall in frustration. "Dammit, Jim, we've got to do something!"

One of the guards snickered. "And what do you intend to do?"

"Do?" the Romulan Commander replied to his Vulcan prisoner. "Why, my dear, I will do nothing. It is what we will do that's important. He reached into a box and pulled out a long flowing gown.

"Prepared for anything, aren't you?" she asked mildly.

Kurak smiled, then his face hardened. "Put it on," he ordered.

T'Kien, seemingly indifferent, took the dress and stepped into the other room. She slipped into the silky gown, paused, then unpinned her hair. She picked up a brush from the dresser and slowly brushed her hair, composing herself for what was to come. Despite the Commander's warning to hurry she waited until she was fully prepared, then returned to the other room.

"Well..." crooned the Commander, "I can see you're worth the wait." He growled a command, and a medic entered carrying a hypo.

T'Kien draped herself over a chair and regarded the hypo coolly. "Do you always require assistance for your conquests?" she enquired calmly.

The medic laughed.

"OUT!" Kurak growled to the medic. He turned to T'Kien and grinned with unnerving coolness. "You are a challenge, but remember - the moment you defy me, I call him back."

"It would be illogical to defy you." T'Kien moved slowly towards Kurak, and he smiled with surprise. His expression changed as she gently caressed his face, his shoulders, moved to his neck...

Roughly, he pulled her hands away. "Keep those lovely hands away from my neck," he warned.

"As you wish, Commander."

He pulled away from her and poured himself a glass of ale.

"May I?"

Kurak, amused, handed her a glass. T'Kien downed it in a

single swallow. "Curious," she commented as she set the empty glass down on the desk.

The Commander looked at her strangely before agreeing, and hastening to swallow the contents of his own glass. He squinted as the liquor hit his stomach. T'Kien merely cocked a brow as she refilled the glasses.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental.

"T'Kien has been gone for over an hour now. I dread to think what Kurak may be doing to her. Spock is no longer in his 'trance', but still seems dazed. He has been paying particular attention to one of the guards, who is trying to justify his stunning T'Kien. Dr. McCoy and I have tried to communicate with Spock, but he is slow to respond, as though his mind is elsewhere. He has not spoken of any way to escape, merely saying, 'Wait.'

"McCoy and I are alert to any chance of escaping, but with my First Officer's condition I don't know if we'll make it far."

"Blast it, Jim! I don't know what's the matter with him. I'm just a country doctor; I've never heard of anything like this. At any rate, what could I do? They took my med kit and my..."

Suddenly McCoy stopped his pacing, only seconds before Kirk would have ordered him to stop. Kirk opened his mouth to thank him, but he held up his hand. "There it is again. Do you hear that?"

Kirk had. Laughter, but the voice was familiar.

"Could it be...?"

They didn't have time to wonder, for at that moment T'Kien staggered round the corner carrying a bottle of electric blue fluid. While the guard admired how the gown suited her figure, she poked her head through the bars.

"Aawww..." she pouted, "my Spocksy-locksy's all wocked up. You're missin' all the fun!" She hiccuped, and laughed.

Spock's eyes met hers; he raised an eyebrow. She raised a similar one, then winked. "Well-lll-lll, I'm free! They should market that potion of Kurak's - I feel so uninhibited! Free as a bird!"

She did a pirouette, and stopped, facing one of the guards. She looked at him drunkenly for a moment, then smiled invitingly. For a moment she said nothing, just stood near him, arms behind her back, letting her body speak for her. Then, "You're the one who stunned me."

The guard nodded as if she had propositioned him.

T'Kien ran the tip of her tongue over her teeth - Kirk had to look away. "Know how I guessed?" she asked the guard. "You're strong and forceful. I can tell. You deserve something for your quick thinking. C'mere." She motioned him closer with one hand.

With a smug grin he pulled her close. "And what do I get?"

"This!" She whacked him on the head with the bottle. "Serves you right," she giggled as he fell to the ground.

The other guard drew his blaster, increasing her laughter. "What - you want to make the same mistake?" She took a drink of ale and handed the bottle to the Romulan, then slunk closer to him, running her fingers up and down his arm. "See?" she purred. "I'm unarmed. You know, they're not going anywhere. How can they when you have the key?" Now, you can stay with them..." she caressed his lips ... "or you can join me. The choice is yours, but I feel like doing something completely illogical, and I'm not waiting." She danced round the corner, then crooked a finger for him to follow.

Torn between duty and pleasure, the guard finally let his hormones decide and hastened after her.

"What the devil is going on here?" McCoy demanded. "Is she drugged? Or just drunk?"

"She is not drugged," Spock replied, the most words he had spoken all evening, "but she is drunk. Drunk as a Tiberian Brandy Rat, I should say. Nonetheless, she does have a plan. I suggest we have patience, gentlemen."

Soon T'Kien returned, looking glazed but sober. She motioned them to keep quiet as she unlocked the door and quietly handed them their phasers.

"A present from another victim," she giggled, then hiccuped. "We must get out of this area. The transporter won't be able to lock on to us within the cloaking field." She pointed through an alley to a small exit. "That's the shortest way. I'll distract the guard while you go through."

With that she took a swig of ale, winked, and staggered towards the guard. She used the same trick she had used on the other guard, and like a Romulan, he fell for it. T'Kien easily subdued him with a neck pinch and joined the others.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 5749.2.

"My commendations to Lieutenant-Commander T'Kien for her... unorthodox plan for our escape from the Romulan colony. Not only did she free us, she also obtained data on the Romulans' latest cloaking device. In addition, she wreaked enough havoc that it will be a while before Commander Kurak contacts the mother ship.

"We have determined that the other source of interference was indeed their mother ship. The cloaking device cuts off most communication, so they have not yet been alerted to our presence. I have decided that it would be in our best interests to leave without incident."

Kirk closed the log without mentioning that T'Kien was still in sickbay recovering from a hangover.

"Mr. Spock," he grinned at his First Officer, "would you care to join me in sickbay?"

"Of course, Captain."

While they walked down to sickbay Spock explained that he had been in contact with T'Kien during the entire ordeal. The reason he had been so hard to communicate with was that he was in a partial mind meld with her.

"I should have known!" Kirk mentally kicked himself for not recognising the way they had touched each other's faces, a touch he should know only too well from personal experience. "McCoy thought you were sick or something. I thought you were just worried."

"Worried, Captain? That emotion is illogical at best, and at worst..."

"Sorry, Spock. I should have known better."

When they entered sickbay T'Kien was sitting up in bed rubbing her temples carefully. Although her face was perfectly composed, she still seemed greener than usual.

"Well, Commander, how are you?" Kirk asked with a smile.

"Quite fit, Captain, except that my head is pounding in time with this machine." With a movement of her eyes she indicated the medical console.

"Good," he replied sternly, "because I want you to remember what I have to say, and pounding it into your brain can't hurt. Your behaviour on the landing party was completely deplorable. First, you subverted the chain of command by contacting the Enterprise. You put us and the ship in danger. And let's not even mention your plan. Your actions are completely unbecoming an officer of your rank..."

"Do I at least get a commendation for original thinking?"

Kirk started with surprise. Where had she learned about that? "Well," he hedged, "you certainly know how to use your talents. You certainly fooled me and the Doctor, not to mention the Romulans. You can act."

"And drink," she added. "Didn't I tell you it could come in handy, Spock? Well?" she demanded after he raised his brows and looked away.

"You did say that," he admitted. "Point well taken."

"Good. I just hope I never have to go to such extremes to prove a point to you again."

